

## *Examining the Role of Agents in 4-H*

Dissatisfactions with professional responsibilities  
for 4-H may be due to diverse expectations

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NO SINGLE aspect of the Cooperative Extension Service is more highly regarded than 4-H Club work. Although 4-H holds a place of importance and prestige in the minds of most Extension workers, many do not think as well of the position of the professional doing 4-H as of county Extension positions with other types of responsibilities. For example, a study in 11 western states shows that most agents prefer a position in adult work.<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds of the Extension workers included in the study said they would prefer a position as agricultural or home demonstration agent to one in 4-H, even with equal pay. In a Wisconsin study only three out of seven 4-H Club agents felt their position was respected as compared to six out of seven agricultural agents.<sup>2</sup> If 4-H work holds a place of prestige in the total Extension program, why is the position of the agent doing 4-H so little regarded?

The purpose of this article is to explore such a question. Studies made of the position of the county 4-H worker have identified dissatisfactions on the part of the 4-H agent. Supervisors, county staffs, local leaders, and others do not agree on what the role is or should be. The kinds of insights into job satisfaction identified by Clegg<sup>3</sup> suggests ways of viewing opportunities for motivating the professional worker quite different from the factors considered in the

<sup>1</sup> Laurel K. Sabrosky, "A Study of the Opinions of Extension Workers in the Western Region Toward Extension Agents' 4-H Club Work" (Washington, D.C.: Federal Extension Service, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Eugene A. Wilkening, *The County Extension Agent in Wisconsin*, Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Research Bulletin 203 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, September, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Denzil O. Clegg, "Work as a Motivator," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Fall, 1963), 141-48.

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studies being reported here; our purpose is to identify some factors that create problems and tend to be associated with reasons why many promising Extension workers choose not to continue working with 4-H.

In the western states study, agricultural and home agents indicated preferences for adult work over 4-H because: (1) their training fit them better for it; (2) it gave them more freedom for decision; (3) it gave them a better chance for advancement; (4) it offered greater prestige; and (5) hours were easier. Other studies corroborate these findings. The most frequent reasons given by agents who left 4-H for other Extension positions or who left the Extension Service entirely were identified in Wisconsin<sup>4</sup> and Indiana<sup>5</sup> studies as "lack of status in eyes of agricultural committee and other county and state personnel," "too many night meetings and too many duties and activities," "low salary," and "less opportunity for advancement." Time-use studies in Vermont<sup>6</sup> and California<sup>7</sup> suggest that such complaints are real.

Some agents leaving the Service have said they enjoyed working with youth more than with adults.<sup>8</sup> This indicates that the position involved much more adult work than was expected. In fact, in one study over one-half of the 4-H agent's time was spent working with adults—not adult work in the sense of other county Extension agents, but work with adult leaders and others involved in the 4-H program.<sup>9</sup> In the western states study<sup>10</sup> a little over half of the Extension workers felt it takes just as much professional training to do 4-H work as adult work; one-fourth thought it takes *more*.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF ROLE

While Extension agents may agree as to the difficulties and problems relating to the position of 4-H Club agent, there is little agreement as to which activities are most important. Far greater agreement was found among members of Wisconsin supervisory teams

<sup>4</sup> J. Mitchell Mackey, "Some Factors Affecting the Tenure of 4-H Club Agents in Wisconsin" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> William G. Rice, "Factors Associated with Tenure of Assistant County Agricultural Agents in Indiana" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> Laurel K. Sabrosky, "A Study of the Use of Time by County 4-H Club Agents in Vermont 1950-51," Agricultural Extension Service, mimeographed C52-32 (Burlington: University of Vermont, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> James A. Beutel, "A Time Use Study of Selected California 4-H Advisers" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> Mackey, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Sabrosky, "A Study of the Use of Time . . .," *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Sabrosky, "A Study . . . in the Western Region . . .," *op. cit.*

agriculture, home economics, 4-H) when they evaluated an agricultural agent than when they evaluated a 4-H agent.<sup>11</sup> This could occur because members of the supervisory staff were not in agreement on what the 4-H Club agent ought to be doing.<sup>12</sup> Apparently, supervisors do not have common criteria for evaluating 4-H positions as they have for other agent positions. Also, considerable variations have been found between county Extension agents and officers of county 4-H leaders associations with respect to expectations of the role of the agent doing 4-H.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, differences have been found in expectations (1) between 4-H Club agents and members of agricultural committees,<sup>14</sup> (2) between adult and junior leaders,<sup>15</sup> and (3) between the way 4-H agents see their role and the way they think local leaders see it.<sup>16</sup>

Such evidence suggests that dissatisfaction with responsibilities for 4-H Club work may be due as much to the varying expectation as to the more readily identified reasons (such as lack of prestige, lack of status, long work hours, or lack of opportunity for advancement). These readily identified reasons may be more like symptoms than evidence of cause. However, differences in role perceptions appear to be not so much between 4-H Club agents<sup>17</sup> as between 4-H Club agents and other groups.<sup>18</sup>

### *Agent Activities*

Evidence of so many differing perceptions of the role of the Extension agent responsible for 4-H suggests the need for more clearly defining the role. Even though a recent study<sup>19</sup> identified differences between groups of supervisors, county Extension agents, and local

<sup>11</sup> Roy D. Cassell, "The Effect of Supervisory Training Upon the Reliability of Two Appraisal Instruments in Evaluating the Relative Job Performance of County Extension Agents" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> Russell D. Robinson, "Perceptions of the County 4-H Club Agent's Role in Wisconsin" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> L. J. Biever, "Roles of County Extension Agents as Perceived by County Agricultural Committee Members in Wisconsin" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

<sup>15</sup> George F. Aker, "The Role of the Assistant County Agent as Perceived by 4-H Adult and Junior Leaders" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1958).

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy E. Duncan, "4-H Club Advisors' Concepts of Their Roles" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

<sup>17</sup> Harold A. Rienecke, "The Role of the 4-H Club Agent as Administrator of the County 4-H Program as Perceived by the Wisconsin 4-H Club Agents" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1959).

<sup>18</sup> Wilkening, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Robinson, *op. cit.*

leaders, it also revealed some broad trends and patterns that show promise for an emerging general definition of the role. In this study, 40 job activities were rated by supervisors and by three county Extension agents and three lay leaders (officers of county 4-H leaders' associations) in each of 20 Wisconsin counties. These respondents reacted to each activity as to whether they considered it (1) very important, (2) important, (3) somewhat important, (4) minor, (5) very minor, or (6) definitely not a part of the position of the 4-H agent. Ratings were made on the basis of importance now being accorded and that *ought* to be accorded each activity.

These job activities were classified into four areas of responsibility: (1) planning and evaluating the county 4-H program; (2) organizing and promoting local clubs, county events, and activities; (3) providing instruction and educational information to leaders and members; and (4) rendering personal service to individuals, clubs, and organizations.

All three respondent groups felt that planning and evaluation activities were and should be accorded highest priority and be further emphasized. Personal service was deemed the least important area of responsibility—and all groups agreed should be further de-emphasized. There was less agreement with respect to the activities comprising instructional and organizational responsibilities. Supervisors felt instructional activities were being given more importance than organizational activities. Agents and leaders felt organizational activities were being given more importance than instructional. Agents, however, agreed with the supervisors that instructional activities should be accorded more importance. Leaders felt that organizational activities ought to remain dominant over instructional.

The following four tables summarize the degrees of importance accorded these job activities by position groups. Each table includes activities for one of the four areas of responsibility. Home economics agents indicated considerable discrepancy between what they felt the agent ought to be doing and what they perceived him as doing with respect to more than half of the 40 activities—particularly in the planning and evaluation and personal service areas, and to a lesser extent in the instruction area. Home economics supervisors identified differences between how the agent ought to be performing and how he was performing activities in the planning and evaluation, organization, and personal service areas.

Agricultural supervisors, on the other hand, identified only two activities for which they felt there was a major discrepancy between what the agent was and ought to be doing. "Write reports" was

considered to be given too little importance and "organize trips and tours" too much. Local leaders cited five activities as presently being given too much importance—all in the personal service category.

Table 1. Ideal importance accorded\* by respondent groups to county 4-H Club agent's "planning and evaluation" job activities

Planning and evaluation job activities	Supervisors			Agents			Leader officers
	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	
Work with program planning committee	1	1†	1	1	1†	1†	1
Work with other Extension agents	1	1†	1†	1†	1†	1	1
Assist in setting objectives	2	1†	1†	2	1†	1	1
Work with 4-H executive committee	2	1†	2†	2	1†	1	1
Determine effectiveness of program	2	1†	1†	2	1†	2	2
Represent university in planning program	2	2	2	2	1†	1	2
Report to agricultural committee	2	1†	2†	2	2†	1	2
Confer with university and district leaders	2	1†	2†	2	2†	2	2
Write reports of results of program	2†	1†	2†	3	2†	2	2
Coordinate activities of local clubs	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

\* Participants in the study responded to the following statement: "In considering which activities ideally should be a part of the position of county 4-H Club agent in this county, I feel this activity ought to be (1) very important, (2) important, (3) somewhat important, (4) minor, (5) very minor, or (6) definitely not a part of this position." Numbers in the table correspond to the number assigned the respective possible ratings.

† Respondent group felt *too little* importance was presently being given this activity and much more importance should be accorded to it.

Table 2. Ideal importance accorded\* by respondent groups to county 4-H Club agent's "instructional" job activities

Instructional job activities	Supervisors			Agents			Leader officers
	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	
Train others to lead 4-H	1	1†	1	1†	2†	1	2
Teach methods of organizing & teaching to leaders	2	2†	1†	1†	2†	1†	2
Plan training meetings with leaders	1	2	2	2†	2†	1	2
Develop and/or organize materials	2	2†	2†	1†	2	2	2
Teach subject matter to leaders	2	2	2	2	2†	2	2
Visit local leaders on request	2	2	3	2	2	2	2
Teach project information to leaders	3	2	2	2†	2†	2	2
Accompany leader on planned home visits	3	4	3	3	3	3†	4
Teach recreational & social skills to leaders	3	4	4	3	4	3	3
Visit local clubs to take part in program	4	4‡	4	2	3	3	3

\* Participants in the study responded to the following statement: "In considering which activities ideally should be a part of the position of county 4-H Club agent in this county, I feel this activity ought to be (1) very important, (2) important, (3) somewhat important, (4) minor, (5) very minor, or (6) definitely not a part of this position." Numbers in the table correspond to the number assigned the respective possible ratings.

† Respondent group felt *too little* importance was presently being given this activity and much more importance should be accorded to it.

‡ Respondent group felt *too much* importance was presently being given this activity and much less importance should be accorded to it.

Agricultural agents, 4-H Club agents, and 4-H supervisors indicated about one-third of the activities as being given too much or too little importance in terms of what ought to be the situation. The 4-H supervisors particularly identified activities in planning and evaluation; 4-H Club agents cited personal service activities. Agricultural agents were more critical of performance in instructional and personal service activities.

There was considerable disagreement with respect to three organizational activities shown in Table 3. "Organize new clubs," "organize fair and achievement committees," and "secure awards, scholarships, and prizes" tended to be rated much higher by agricultural supervisors, agricultural agents, and local leaders than by other position groups.

Table 3. Ideal importance accorded\* by respondent groups to county 4-H Club agent's "organizational" job activities

Organizational job activities	Supervisors			Agents			Local leaders
	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	
Oversee carrying out of program	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
Publicize program	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Send out letters and announcements	2	3‡	3‡	2‡	2	2	2
Assist in finding new leaders	3	3	3	2	3	3	2
Organize judging and demonstration committees	2	3‡	3‡	2	3	2	2
Speak at service clubs and groups	3	2†	3	3†	3	2	3
Organize new clubs	2	4‡	2	2	3	3	2
Organize trips and tours	3‡	4‡	4‡	3	3	2	2
Organize fair and achievement committees	2	4‡	4	2	3	2	2
Secure awards, scholarships, and prizes	3	5‡	5‡	3	4‡	3‡	2

\* Participants in the study responded to the following statement: "In considering which activities ideally should be a part of the position of county 4-H Club agent in this county, I feel this activity ought to be (1) very important, (2) important, (3) somewhat important, (4) minor, (5) very minor, or (6) definitely not a part of this position." Numbers in the table correspond to the number assigned the respective possible ratings.

† Respondent group felt *too little* importance was presently being given this activity and much more importance should be accorded to it.

‡ Respondent group felt *too much* importance was presently being given this activity and much less importance should be accorded to it.

Local leaders rated five personal service activities (shown in Table 4) higher than did any of the other respondent groups ("personally conduct junior leader group," "accompany and chaperone on trips," "attend local club meetings to show support," "provide transportation," and "show movies at club meetings"). But even with two of the activities (chaperoning and providing transportation), leaders felt that more importance was presently being given than ought to be the case.

The apparent willingness of many respondents to increase empha-

sis on activities of "planning and evaluation" (Table 1) and "providing instruction and information" (Table 2) and to decrease emphasis on "organization" (Table 3) and "personal service" activities (Table 4) points to a possible changing role for the agent doing 4-H work.

Table 4. Ideal importance accorded\* by respondent groups to county 4-H Club agent's "personal service" job activities

Personal service job activities	Supervisors			Agents			Leader officers
	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	Agr.	H.Ec.	4-H	
Personally conduct junior leader group	4	5‡	4‡	4‡	4‡	4‡	3
Accompany and chaperone on trips	4	5‡	5‡	4‡	4‡	4‡	3‡
Attend local club meetings to show support	4	5‡	5‡	4‡	4‡	4‡	3
Provide transportation	5	5‡	5‡	4‡	4‡	4‡	3‡
Act as secretary for leaders' associations, fairs, etc.	5	5‡	5	5	5	5‡	4‡
Make personal visits and social calls	4	5‡	5	4	5‡	5	4
Personally lead recreation	5	5	5	5	5‡	5‡	5‡
Show movies at club meetings	5	6	6	5	5‡	6‡	3
Check and grade every member's record book	5	6	6	5‡	5	6	5
Fix, clean up halls, camps, fairgrounds	6	6‡	6	5‡	6‡	5‡	5‡

\* Participants in the study responded to the following statement: "In considering which activities ideally should be a part of the position of county 4-H Club agent in this county, I feel this activity ought to be (1) very important, (2) important, (3) somewhat important, (4) minor, (5) very minor, or (6) definitely not a part of this position." Numbers in the table correspond to the number assigned the respective possible ratings.

‡ Respondent group felt *too much* importance was presently being given this activity and much less importance should be accorded to it.

### County Situation

Only county Extension agents appeared to differentiate the role of the 4-H agent depending on the type of county—whether urban or rural.<sup>20</sup> District supervisors identified no significant differences in the role in urban and rural counties. Neither did local leaders. Apparently leaders in the urban counties were influenced by their rural backgrounds, seeing the program as essentially rural. Supervisors appeared to generalize about the position without making major distinctions between types of counties. Agents, on the other hand, dealing with day-to-day problems of increasing urbanization, saw a difference in role of the agent, depending on the county situation. These findings correspond to those reported from another study. Boyle and Brown found 4-H agents in urban areas critical that they did not have more urban-oriented teaching and publicity

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

materials and that the Service was not more closely identified with urban society.<sup>21</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

A number of studies make it clear that there is not general agreement as to the role of the county agent doing 4-H work. The nature of the role is such that a person occupying the position must, at the same time and to some degree, fulfill the expectations of his supervisors, his co-workers, lay leaders, and perhaps others. When these expectations are quite different, it may become problematic for the agent to know what he really ought to be doing—what constitutes the most important activities of his job.

When supervisors and county Extension agents do not agree on the role of the 4-H agent, problems regarding professional satisfaction and advancement may arise. When agents in the same office do not agree, misunderstandings and even ill will can develop, leading to a breakdown of cooperation and communication. When agents and local leaders do not agree, the program can become stagnated with each blaming the other for the impasse.

Differences point to a need for continuing efforts to reach some common understandings of the appropriate role for a county 4-H Club worker; however, agreement on general principles should make this easier. With increasing agreement on the importance of activities in the area of planning and evaluation and lessening emphasis on personal service activities, the position of county 4-H worker is being increasingly regarded as a professional one.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick G. Boyle and Emory J. Brown, "Adapting 4-H to Urban Situations," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Spring, 1964), 29-36.

MAN is a communicating animal. We get much of our meaning for what we are, for the very concept of self, from communicating—with self and others. We talk to ourselves in order to reach decisions, to know ourselves and others, or even to pass the time. Certainly, much of the research in why people attend to the mass media indicates that they read or listen or view for companionship—to pass the time.

—from DAVID K. BERLO, "A Philosophy of Communication."

WE CARE what happens to people only in proportion as we know what people are.—HENRY JAMES.