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Research article

Commensality, ritual, and reciprocity: Cattle feedyard managers' perspectives on safety culture

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Abstract

This article focuses on how cattle feedyard managers think about the idea of "safety culture" and why it might matter for the well-being of feedyard operations and their workforce. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic research in the Great Plains of the United States, it describes strategies used by managers to cultivate a sense of community, belonging, and kinship among employees, which some managers believed to be key features of feedyard cultures that foster safety. The findings suggest that efforts to improve the safety and health of cattle feedyard workers may benefit from considering how safety initiatives are shaped by the social and cultural dimensions of feedyards, the structural context of these animal feeding operations, and the everyday lives, experiences, and interactions of people who work on them.

KEYWORDS: agriculture, feedyards, organizational culture, safety culture, applied anthropology

Introduction: Cattle feedyards in the United States

There are nearly one billion head of cattle across the world and 90 million in the United States (U.S.) (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023a). Cattle production is "the most important agricultural industry" in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022), the world's leading producer of beef (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023a). In the U.S. and other countries with industrialized beef production systems, cattle feedyards (also called feedlots) are an important segment of the beef production process. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there are over 26,000 feedyards in the U.S.; of these, 24,000 have less than 1,000 head of cattle (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023b). Some feedyards are much larger, often corporately owned operations with tens of thousands of animals. Feedyards provide cattle with a grain-based diet and nutrition, typically for 90–300 days, aiming to grow them to market weight quickly and efficiently for slaughter (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022).

States in the central and southern Great Plains region of the U.S. have the highest numbers of "cattle on feed" in the country (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023b) and some of the largest feedyards in the world. This region, often called the "heartland" or "breadbasket" of America, was once a vast and diverse grassland landscape stretching from Canada to Mexico through the center of the continent. Agriculture, energy development, and other industries have dramatically transformed the region, and the expansion of grain production and changes in consumer demand, irrigation, transportation, and other technologies contributed to the proliferation of large-scale cattle feeding across the Plains during the mid-twentieth century (Wishart, 2004).

Cattle feedyards play an important role in U.S. agriculture and the global food system. These concentrated animal feeding operations reflect broader structural changes in American agriculture, including industrialization, specialization, intensification, increased scale of operation, consolidation, vertical integration, technological change, and the globalization of meat production. Like other agricultural and food production industries worldwide, cattle feedyards also depend on immigrant labor (Holmes, 2013). These changes have important implications for rural communities and the safety, health, and well-being of the people who work in agriculture.

Occupational injuries and precarious labor in the cattle feeding industry

Occupational injuries are a persistent issue for feedyard workers, operations, and the cattle feeding industry in general. Feedyard work can be tough, involving difficult work in challenging conditions, including extreme heat, cold, snow, ice, mud, and dust. Many

of these dirty, dangerous, and demanding (3-D) jobs (Quandt et al., 2013) involve repeated interactions with cattle, horses, machinery, and veterinary chemicals, contributing to an industry with high-risk work and high rates of occupational injury and illness (Ramos et al., 2022). These injuries are not only costly to workers but also to feedyard operations due in part to rising workers' compensation insurance costs and the shortage of available labor.

Feedyards often struggle to hire and retain workers and increasingly rely on immigrant labor. In previous decades, feedyard managers describe what felt like local labor "knocking down the door," comprised, in large part, of young men and "cowboys" from farms, ranches, and surrounding rural areas. As social and demographic change has reshaped Great Plains communities over the past half-century—erasing many family farms and ranches from the landscape—feedyards have turned to migrant and immigrant labor from other countries, particularly in Latin America (Klataske & Bendixsen, 2022). Now, immigrants are estimated to comprise at least half of the workforce (Villarejo, 2012). Many of these workers are Spanish-speakers from Mexico and Central America, but there are also many Afrikaans-speaking South Africans working in the Great Plains.

These immigrant workers and many of the local people working on feedyards experience precarious lives and circumstances (Klataske & Bendixsen, 2022). Immigrant workers often perform contingent jobs without legal authorization in the U.S., leaving some to work and live in fear with fewer employment and social protections and limited access to information, training, and resources. Consequently, the burden of occupational injury is experienced by a particularly vulnerable workforce. Feedyard workers also endure various physical, mental, emotional, and social impacts associated with their jobs, such as physical and mental fatigue resulting from the fast pace of work, long hours, and limited days off (Carlo et al., 2023; Ramos et al., 2021a; Ramos et al., 2021b; Rowland et al., 2023). In fact, it is not uncommon in our research to meet feedyard workers who routinely work 12 consecutive days or take one day off every other week. While some workers—especially migrants and immigrants with children and families to support—welcome and express gratitude for the opportunity to work, even without paid overtime, many also describe the toll of long hours, fatigue, stress, injuries, and chronic pain.

Occupational safety not only impacts workers, but also those who depend on their labor. Most of the feedyard managers, owners, and operators we have met in our research would likely agree that injuries are costly—bad for business and the bottom line. As managers often point out, it is not easy to find and retain people willing to do these jobs. Keeping employees safe and on the job is crucial for getting cattle fed.

The social and cultural dimensions of safety

Feedyard worker safety is shaped by more than rules, protocols, signs, or training that "checks a box." Worker safety does not exist within a vacuum. It is also social, shaped by more than just the decisions of individuals. Workers are embedded in social systems, organizational cultures, and structural contexts that shape their relations to risk. In the cattle-feeding industry, formal safety training is often limited or unavailable to workers for various reasons, including cost, lack of language-accessible resources, and management priorities and perceptions. All employers have a general duty to provide a safe and healthy working environment for their workers; however, there are limited agriculture-specific Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations, particularly those that could apply to livestock operations (OSH Act, 1970). Furthermore, OSHA regulations are not enforced on farms with 10 or fewer employees unless there is a temporary housing camp (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). Although there is some industry-specific guidance on best practices, especially for animal welfare and health (e.g., Beef Quality Assurance), these are not mandatory (Beef Quality Assurance, 2023).

Feedyard managers, however, generally express a willingness and/or desire for safety training materials and resources, as well as interest in reducing costly injuries and a recognition of the role of culture. Our research contributes to ongoing transdisciplinary efforts to better understand and improve the safety, health, and well-being of feedyard workers by working in collaboration with industry stakeholders. Asking questions about these complex human dimensions of feedyards is essential for bringing about change.

One way to discuss safety is to explore the concept of *safety culture*. This popular and widely used term is defined as the "deeply held but often unspoken safety-related beliefs, attitudes, and values that interact with an organization's systems, practices, people, and leadership to establish norms about how things are done in the organization" (Gillen et al., 2014, p. 14). While scholars debate its definition, the concept of safety culture offers an opportunity for dialogue about the social and cultural dimensions of agricultural safety and health, along with the design features of organizational cultures that foster worker safety.

So, how do managers—tasked with overseeing these complex systems that depend on the bodies of both humans and animals—believe that work can be organized to better protect the safety and health of the people they employ? What can we learn from feed-

yard managers, workers, and other stakeholders that might contribute to potential recommendations and interventions? How might listening and learning from managers help us, as anthropologists and public health professionals, advance our understanding of safety culture? Answering these questions presents an opportunity to reduce human suffering, support rural communities, and shape the future of agricultural and food production systems.

Overview and purpose

For the past several years, we have studied the safety and health of feedyard workers in the Great Plains (Klataske & Bendixsen, 2022). We have sought to better understand the experiences, needs, and well-being of both the local and immigrant workers who increasingly make up the region's agricultural workforce and population in rural communities (Carlo et al., 2023; Ramos et al., 2017; Ramos et al., 2020 Ramos et al., 2021a; Ramos et al., 2021b; Rowland et al., 2023).

This article, however, turns our attention to the perspectives of feedyard managers. We focus on some of the ways that feedyard managers think about the idea of "safety culture" and why it might matter for the well-being of feedyard operations and their workforce. We also describe a few of the strategies that managers have implemented to cultivate organizational cultures that foster safety.

Methods and research design

We conducted 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with feedyard managers, owners, operators, and other management-level employees in Kansas and Nebraska between 2021 and 2023. While there is some variation among managers who are hired employees, occupy different roles in organizational hierarchies, or function in a management capacity as owner-operators, we generally use the term *manager* to refer to these various management-level positions and highlight the role of owner-operators. These two states, located in the heart of the Great Plains, have two of the highest numbers of cattle on feed in the country (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). These interviews were designed to assess how managers understood and made sense of the concept of safety culture—a term that everyone we met knew and encountered in their industry—but is vaguely defined and provoked varying ideas about what it is, what it includes, where it comes from, and how it can change. We focused on asking managers questions about what safety culture means to them, how they address safety in the workplace, the various is-

sues and challenges they face, and how they think feedyards and the industry can better foster safety.

Generally, we arranged visits to feedyards and interviewed managers in person at the workplace. Feedyards ranged in size from a few thousand head of cattle to over a 100,000-head capacity. These visits sometimes included tours of the operations, interactions with other employees, and periods of rapid ethnographic research. One or both of us conducted the interviews, which typically lasted 45–90 minutes. Participants were compensated with a $50 gift card. Most of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Rapid ethnographic assessments generally lasted one or two days on the feedyard, involving multiple areas of operation and interactions with workers in various roles, and built on previous multi-sited ethnographic research on feedyards. This research was approved by the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Institutional Review Board Institutional Review Board (IRB #099-21-EX).

Key findings: Commensality, ritual, and reciprocity

We discovered that some managers believed that a sense of community, belonging, and kinship were key features of feedyard cultures that foster worker safety. These features were perceived to improve communication, boost morale, cultivate human connection and cooperation, and perhaps most importantly, enhance labor retention. Finding and keeping people with skills and experience related to cattle and horses willing to work was a major challenge, which managers often mentioned when discussing safety culture. The structural contexts of rural change, labor availability, and immigration were also seen as important factors that impacted feedyards and shaped workers' experiences. To bring about cultural change and cultivate a sense of community, belonging, and kinship among workers, managers have implemented a variety of strategies.

One of the strategies we encountered was commensality, the act of eating together (Jönsson et al., 2021). We visited one relatively small, family-owned feedyard in Kansas where, according to the owner-operator, his wife cooks lunch for their employees every day, who gather and eat together in the main office building. Another larger feedyard—part of a corporately-owned group of feedyards in Nebraska—provides a similar midday meal and time to rest, talk, and interact with co-workers. This strategy stands in contrast to many feedyards we have visited where workers are not provided with food or more than a microwave in a dusty breakroom or workspace.

As the manager in Nebraska explained, these meals are not only a moment for banter and laughter but also an opportunity to discuss important safety concerns or issues in the workplace. From his perspective, the ritual of commensality is designed not just to feed people but to improve communication, cooperation, and the organizational culture of the feedyard. "That's exactly why we do it," he told us bluntly about the meal's purpose. "Communication is difficult, but when they come here, we can talk about things." The meal brings co-workers together, allows for discussion about workplace issues, and helps the foremen get their "ducklings in a group," which is much easier than when workers head to town for lunch.

The workers seemed to enjoy and appreciate these meals, too, as the manager explained and as we later observed. "Now you can't even hear yourself think," he told us, describing the laughter, jokes, and pleasant atmosphere as workers eat, relax, and socialize.

The owner-operator in Kansas, whose wife cooked lunch for his crew and who claimed never to have had a workers' compensation claim resulting from a job-related injury or illness, expressed a similar rationale for providing food and eating together. "We try to create more of a family atmosphere here, I guess you might say." He added, "And that's kind of my everyday meeting … it's nothing structured, but everybody talks and knows what's going on." In addition to facilitating communication, coordination, and problem-solving, these gatherings also present opportunities to discuss safety and raise awareness of hazards and risks.

Gathering together and sharing a meal is "one of the most powerful tools that I have," the man told us, "because everybody knows what's going on." It is so powerful that if the current system became strained with the growth of the feedyard, he would hire a cook. Curious about this practice, we asked if they have always provided meals. "Yes," he answered, adding, "I think it's one of the reasons why I'm able to keep my help. I try to treat them really well." From his perspective, treating people like family and encouraging a family atmosphere in the workplace helps to boost morale, which ultimately helps to retain labor and reduce safety concerns.

When talking about safety culture, managers described labor retention as an important aspect of worker safety because it reduces turnover of employees with experience, training, knowledge, and perhaps a sense of pride and commitment to the work and workplace—all of which are perceived to reduce the likelihood of costly injuries. Managers, like these two in Kansas and Nebraska, believe that worker retention is enhanced by a sense of community, belonging, and kinship.

However, the family-oriented manager in Kansas recognized that his approach was unique. He admitted that there might be challenges scaling his strategy of home-cooked meals but noted that, on bigger feedyards. "People are treated as a number, not as a person," something we have heard repeatedly in our interviews and interactions with workers. Jobs on large corporately owned feedyards, for example, are often described by workers as faster-paced and less flexible, with high turnover and greater divisions of labor among different divisions of operation.

"I think you have to respect those people, just like your son or daughter," he explained. In other words, he pointed out that, while giving workers food can bring them together, the benefit of commensality comes from feedyard cultures that foster a sense of community, belonging, and kinship and that values workers for more than just their labor. This way of working stands in contrast to feedyard cultures in which workers do not feel like their body or humanity is valued, or as one immigrant worker described, made them feel "replaceable."

Before we parted ways with this feedyard in Kansas, we stood around with a group of workers in the dusty driveway in front of a machine shed just across from the main office where the owner-operator sat at his desk. In contrast to many workers we have met, these men (and one woman), who appeared noticeably less pressured and more upbeat than most, spoke positively about their feedyard culture, highlighted how worker safety was prioritized, and expressed their desire to keep working there.

Like the act of eating together, some of the other strategies we encountered also involved aspects of ritual and efforts to establish new forms of reciprocity. For example, the manager of a large corporate feedyard—one of the largest in Nebraska—told us with pride about his decision to host an annual competitive rodeo involving his employees, most of whom come from rural and/or "cowboy" backgrounds in Mexico.

This approximately 80,000-head feedyard, which relies primarily on migrant and immigrant workers, built a roping arena on the facility, next to the manager's house. Every summer, the feedyard leases roping steers for the employees, "The guys that want to rope go down there and rope." About twice a summer, they organize a rodeo.

Some of the workers who had competed in team roping expressed their desire for a ranch rodeo. "I said, 'Yeah, go ahead,'" the manager explained, noting his support for the new ritual. The top competitors each year receive special belt buckles. One of the employees knows a belt buckle craftsman in Mexico who features the feedyard logo in the design, and the awards are presented by the manager and head cowboy.

As the manager reported, this ritual involving cowboy skills, tradition, competition, camaraderie, and goodwill between workers and management usually involves eating together, "So those things turn into a big cookout, and we drink some beer and that kind of thing. They just love that kind of stuff."

Other managers we met also described ritual events such as Christmas parties, barbecues, picnics, and fishing trips as strategies for fostering a sense of community, belonging, and kinship. This manager in Nebraska recalled the first moment he decided to host a Christmas party for his employees, many of whom were migrant workers and dislocated from their families. It was Thanksgiving Day, and like other holidays, this usually meant that workdays ended early if all the essential work was completed.

Heading home, the man:

> ... stopped in there at the horse barn, and there was six or eight of those guys sitting there—and you talk about long faces … I went home to my family. I live just right over here across the road. I went home to my family. And I couldn't get it off my mind—the look on those kids' faces. Here I am. Work is done. The cattle are fed. Everything's done. I'm going home to my family and those young men are just going to back to the house and sit there. So that Christmas—Christmas Eve Day—I told these guys that we're going to do something for Christmas Eve day. That's big for those people.

The manager continued to describe how these celebrations became an annual occurrence with benefits for the organization. "So, every year since that time, every Thanksgiving, every Christmas Eve, we cook something. We have a big meal over in the shop. These new rituals "made a big difference," he told us. "And what it's done—it's kind of pulled them all together. It's kind of made a community."

For this manager, fostering a sense of community, belonging, and kinship also involves reciprocity and regard for the rituals and family lives of workers. In our lengthy conversation, he told stories of attending the birthday party for an employee's daughter and purchasing homemade food from another worker's wife and popsicles from their child, who was saving up to buy a computer for her family. "It's the little things," the man explained.

The owner-operator in Kansas expressed a similar sentiment about prioritizing workers' family lives and well-being, as well as the value of kinship as a design feature of feedyard cultures. One benefit, he explained, is that employees with families are more likely to stay in the area. Several other managers also noted this connection, along with efforts

to provide adequate housing for immigrant workers to bring their families, settle down, send their kids to local schools, and stay on the job. Because his workers have families, the owner-operator elaborated, "I want them to be involved in their kids." Family is a priority, he explained:

> I have had to tell a guy that he *has* to take off to go to his kid's track meet because, I mean, you need to be there. And actually, one guy said, "I need the money." I said, "Well, you get out of here at 1:00. I'm going to pay you 'til 5:00. Go to the track meet."

He summarized the significance of this example by explaining to us, "We try to create more of a family atmosphere here, I guess you might say." This perspective contrasts with what many workers describe as a common attitude among managers to get work done and get it done at all costs—an attitude that workers often perceive as undermining safety culture.

In our conversation with the manager in Nebraska, we asked how rituals and reciprocity—like hosting a rodeo or supporting workers' families—relate to safety. To answer, the manager told us a story about his boy's football coach and his unique ability to bring out the best in players. The point, he explained, was that the team was *a family*. The coach had a saying that always stuck with him and shaped his views as a feedyard manager: "When you get people to a point if they like you, they'll do a lot for you." However, the coach added, "When you get people to a point where they don't want to let you down, or they don't want to disappoint you, then you have something—then you have something special."

As this and other managers have pointed out, feedyard cultures that meet workers' needs and keep them showing up contribute to more than just labor retention. They also help to attract talent and keep the "right" employees with desired qualities and characteristics, which impacts worker safety. This large Nebraska feedyard holds its head cowboy, a bilingual Mexican immigrant capable and qualified "to run this place," in especially high regard. When we asked how this manager ensures that someone like him does not want to leave, he answered, "Treat him like a human."

Discussion

This research shows that some feedyard managers believed that organizational cultures that fostered safety provided workers with a sense of community, belonging, and kinship. A sense of community entails developing feelings of membership among workers

where they feel like part of the team. It implies that workers have some influence over what goes on, that some of their needs are met by being part of the group, and that they have a shared emotional connection and commitment to the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In this study, sense of community, belonging, and kinship were perceived to improve communication, cultivate human connection, and reduce turnover, all of which were talked about as important components of safety culture. Some managers have implemented strategies to cultivate these kinds of relations and social bonds, including rituals of commensality, competition, and traditional celebrations, along with efforts to reshape patterns of reciprocity and value in the family. Rituals, including those focused on commensality, have important purposes, inherent and often unspoken meanings, and go beyond solely meeting operational compliance requirements (e.g., Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations) (Keswin, 2022). Instead, these rituals expanded the practice to also focus on meeting the social and human needs of workers and their families. When feedyard managers talked about safety culture, they often described these social and cultural dimensions of safety as important aspects of workplaces where "everyone goes home at night."

Efforts to improve the safety and health of cattle feedyard workers may benefit from considering how safety initiatives are shaped by the social and cultural dimensions of feedyards, along with the structural context of these operations and the lives of people who work on them. Our findings, consistent with previous literature, illustrate that understanding safety culture demands attention to more than just rules, signs, protocols, and company policies and that perhaps bringing about improvements may involve addressing the ways in which people relate to and think about one another (Carrillo, 2020). Safety culture is not just another product or program to deploy (Le Coze, 2019). Instead, the experiences and perspectives of managers tell us that some are searching for, or striving toward, ways of working together that deeply value human connection and relationships far beyond just getting cattle fed.

Safety culture is an underdeveloped concept in agriculture. Further research should explore the variation in strategies for shaping agricultural operations' culture—including positive deviations from the norm—along with the associated impacts on worker safety, health, and well-being. Previous research has demonstrated positive relationships between safety, sense of community, and life satisfaction (Ramos et al., 2020; Ramos, McGinley, & Carlo, 2021b). It may also be useful to explore the concept of safety culture cross-culturally, particularly given the ethnic and cultural divergence between many agricultural managers and workers (Yorio et al., 2019). Another direction may be to in-

vestigate how ideas and interactions in agriculture compare to other dangerous occupations like firefighters, police, military, oil rig workers, or construction workers, where tight social bonds, strong norms around masculinity and toughness, and a sense of camaraderie are present. How do those involved in these occupations think about and approach safety culture differently? What are the various social, cultural, and structural factors that cultivate or constrain a sense of community, belonging, and kinship?

As we have learned and experienced in our research, there are many feedyards where these design features do not characterize the organizational culture or managers' approaches to worker safety. Workers often report feeling undervalued and replaceable in 3-D jobs with expectations, experiences, and lasting impacts of occupational injuries. Yet, when managers have an opportunity to express their perspectives on safety culture, the importance some place on caring for workers and their families suggests that cultural change is possible and may have ripple effects both inside and outside the workplace (Valcour, 2013), reverberating throughout rural communities and ultimately our food system.

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Povzetek

Članek se osredotoča na to, kako vodje krmišč na rančih za govedo razmišljajo o ideji *varnostne kulture* in zakaj bi to lahko bilo pomembno za dobrobit dela in delavcev v krmiščih. Na podlagi intervjujev in etnografskih raziskav v Velikih ravnicah ZDA opisuje strategije, ki jih vodje uporabljajo za gojenje občutka skupnosti, pripadnosti in sorodstva med zaposlenimi, saj nekateri izmed njih verjamejo, da so to ključne značilnosti krmišč, ki spodbujajo varnost. Ugotovitve kažejo, da bi prizadevanjem za izboljšanje varnosti in zdravja delavcev v krmiščih lahko koristil premišljen razmislek o tem, kako varnostne pobude oblikujejo socialne in kulturne razsežnosti krmišč, kakšen je strukturni kontekst opravil hranjenja živali ter kakšni so vsakdanje življenje, izkušnje in interakcije ljudi, ki tam delajo.

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