

When Feelings Shape Understanding: Undergraduate Perceptions of Agriculture

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Introduction

Modern society continues to experience gaps in agricultural knowledge and literacy (Frick et al., 1995). As populations interact less with production agriculture, a disconnect forms, resulting in consumers who are more susceptible to misinformation and unrealistic expectations (Specht, McKim, & Rutherford, 2014). When the line between reality and expectations is blurred by stereotypes, media portrayals, and limited exposure to industry practices, strong emotional responses are elicited (Specht, McKim, & Rutherford, 2014). It is imperative that the younger generation is agriculturally literate as they represent the next generation of leaders and lawmakers who will make decisions regarding the agricultural industry and the nation (Cosby et al., 2022). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate students with agriculture and how those experiences shaped their perceptions of the agricultural industry. Two research questions were used to frame this study: (1) What are East Texas A&M University undergraduate students' experiences with agriculture, and (2) How have those experiences influenced the students' perceptions of agriculture?

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized Social Constructivism Theory (SCT) as the theoretical framework to explore undergraduate students' experiences with and perceptions of agriculture. Social constructivism posits that the act of learning originates in a social context; therefore, cognitive functions must be a product of social interactions (Cole et al, 1978, p.86). Knowledge is something actively constructed by the learner in a response to the learner's interpretation of the environment. SCT presents learning as an active process influenced by social interactions and cultural experiences (UC Berkeley Graduate Student Instructor Teaching & Resource Center, 2026).

Methodology

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the participants' lives experiences (Moustakas, 1994 & Creswell, 2013). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilized to sample from the population of the East Texas A&M University Student Government Association due to their diverse backgrounds and civic engagement on campus. Data was collected via open-ended interviews structured around areas of agricultural literacy defined by (Frick et al., 1995). Data analysis involved using horizontalization and in vivo coding (Moustakas, 1994) to develop themes and patterns. Trustworthiness was addressed via member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Data analysis from this study revealed two themes reflecting the influence emotion plays in developing perceptions of agriculture: (1) systemic distrust of agricultural areas and (2) emotions rooted in experiences.

Theme 1 reflects the *systemic distrust of corporate agriculture* by this study's participants. Participants reported feeling distrustful of corporate agriculture particularly in areas where misunderstanding and misinformation is widespread and influenced by family and social

media. Influences such as family and social media were cited as major contributors to participants' perceptions, leading to distrust of processed foods and marketing strategies. Erin stated, "I don't like to mess with things in stores because I just know that can cause a lot of health risks to people. And especially, I feel like today in the U.S., many people have a lot of health issues due to things that are being produced in stores." Tanya recounts her mother telling her that American food is artificial, "I had asked my mom, I said, isn't food, food? She said, the food here is pumped with chemicals." Additionally, participants perceived the labeling and marketing of food items as non-transparent. Erin expressed, "I know, you'll read ingredients, and it'll say one thing, but a lot of the time it's not accurate. I'll just say that because people can put it on a label to sell it [*sic*] doesn't mean it has to be true." Participants expressed that they did not trust the safety of store-bought agricultural products because they perceived agricultural as untrustworthy and misleading.

Theme 2 reflects participant's strong feelings, i.e. perceptions of agriculture manifest from *emotions rooted in experience*. Experiences with health issues, family influences, and concerns regarding resource conservation contributed to participants' negative perceptions of American food systems. Wendy shared that living with her parents contributed to her distrust of agricultural products in stores; "The biggest thing that I remember is we would always get the brown eggs instead of the white eggs, because we were told that the white eggs were not real eggs." Barry's frustrations were explained with expletives, "When it comes to companies, I think they use us. They're just [expletive]. Because do you know how much it takes to grow everything? They just take advantage of people. I wish that they were a person so that I could just go up and slap them, so maybe they get some sense, but it's not that easy." Additionally, experiences rooted in family and social media contributed to strong reactions regarding animal husbandry and animal slaughter.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Participants often viewed production agriculture positively, but viewed processing and marketing areas negatively, as they were unaware and distrustful of their practices. Participants claimed their knowledge regarding the agricultural industry often stems from their familial influences or social media; expressing little to no agricultural education during secondary school. Often, their perspectives are influenced by emotions tied to an agricultural experience. Their perceptions are rooted in emotions, projecting individual experiences onto an entire industry and contributing to misunderstanding and misinformation. The findings of this study provide several implications and recommendations. Emotions influence a student's perceptions; therefore, opportunities exist for educators to incorporate agricultural literacy learning opportunities into existing curriculum. Additionally, it is recommended that post-secondary institutions include an agricultural literacy course in their core curriculum to address fact-based decision making rather than emotional response to agriculture practices. Finally, East Texas A&M University should include agricultural topics in the next Civil Discourse Symposium to enable students to engage with industry professionals, encourage academic discussion, and curtail emotional reasoning. Future research should include quantitative studies with a more diverse population of students.

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