



At the nexus of work and family: Family farms in upstate New York



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ABSTRACT

Today's farm families contend with the paradox of an increase in the cultural values associated with farming and a decrease in the viability of farming as a way of life. How do families understand and organize their labor as farmers under such conditions? This paper explores the meaning of work and family for contemporary farmers in upstate New York. Drawing first on an analysis of 116 websites, we show that farm families employ four different “work-family narratives” in public representations of their farm: (a) lifestyle, (b) small business, (c) community oriented and (d) market oriented. We then turn to in-depth interviews with 39 farm families and find that families draw on these four “work-family narratives” in private explanations of their decisions to farm and gendered divisions of labor. We also find that narratives may evolve over time to adapt to changes in the household and farm business. This suggests both agency and diversity in farm families' adaptations to modern marketplace conditions.

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1. Introduction

The family farm is iconic to the rural idyll (Bryant and Pini, 2011, 7). Today increased interest in local food and food culture places the family farm at the epicenter of a resurgence in small-scale agriculture (Gagné, 2011; Schnell, 2007; Schor, 2011; Schor and Thompson, 2014). Indeed, the number of small family farms has been slowly rising, striking when compared to a drastic drop in the number of mid-sized farms during the same period (Farmer and Bertz, 2016; USDA, 2014). Heightened interest in locally based food production appears to be luring new farmers into the industry (Carlson, 2008; Gray, 2013). Farmers' markets have expanded considerably; family farms receive more and more publicity with products increasingly marketed as being *farm fresh* or from farms that are *family-owned and operated* (Gray, 2013). In New York, family farms are touted as vital to the state economy (DiNapoli, 2015).

Despite the renewed cultural interest in family-based agriculture, families continue to “weather economic crisis,” a recurrent theme in descriptions of U.S. farming since the Great Depression (Comstock, 1987; Conger and Elder, 1994; Grant, 2002). Consolidation in the food industry, marked by significant vertical and

horizontal integration, favors large-scale agriculture leaving smaller scale operations at a significant disadvantage (Constance et al., 2014; Thu, 2009). As a result, many families that farm experience significant hurdles and constraints (Gray, 2013). Today more and more farmers earn ever higher proportions of their income off the farm to make ends meet (Beach, 2013; Hoppe and Banker, 2010). In New York, 43 percent of the farm operators statewide considered their primary occupation in 2012 to be off the farm, and less than 10 percent of farm operators reported no off-farm income (USDA, 2015). Modern farm families contend with the paradox of increased cultural values associated with farming and decreased viability of farming as a way of life.

What does work and family mean to modern farmers? How do families organize and mobilize their labor under market conditions that favor large-scale operations and yet increasingly value food produced by small-scale, family owned and operated farms? Family scholars have long described the dynamic interplay between work and family (Tilly and Scott, 1978) even on farms where “the collocation of home and work is normal, not exceptional” (Brandth, 2015: 4). Furthermore, flexibility in the nexus between work and family may enable families to sustain farming under variable economic contexts (Friedman, 1978). Today, the economic rewards from farming are fairly minimal for small and mid-sized operations, insufficient to sustain a family economy. Yet the family, as a cultural construct and organizing unit, is central to maintaining farms and an increasingly useful tool for marketing and promotion.

In this paper, we seek to unpack the monolithic portrayal of the

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modern “family farm” by exploring the diverse ways farm families configure work and family in public representations of themselves as businesses and their descriptions, in private, of family farm operations. To do so we draw on mixed-methods. First, we analyze 116 family farm websites in a six county region of upstate New York. We observe four prominent “work-family narratives” in online representations of the farm: lifestyle, small business, community oriented and market oriented. In our second step of analysis, we explore descriptions of the interplay between work and family in 39 in-depth interviews with farm families. We find that families use these four narratives to justify their varying rationales for farming and strategies for gendered divisions of labor. Moreover, interviews show that narratives are not discrete categorizations. Family members may invoke multiple narratives to describe changes in the family farm over time. “Work-family narratives” are not static, but rather evolve as operations expand and contract over time to accommodate changes in household life cycles.

2. Background: the work and family divide

Scholarship typically credits economic change as bringing about a division of labor between the work family members do outside of the home, to produce an income, and the work they do inside the home, as household consumers (Tilly and Scott, 1978). With industrialization, families' income generating activities became increasingly separate from the household economy, originally occurring in factories but now also in manufacturing and the service based economy (Boris and Lewis, 2006). These workplace conditions constrain families' decisions about how to reconcile work and family (Williams, 2010).

As a result, divisions of labor outside the home have often caused conflict within families. Women find themselves working “a second shift” when they return from work, caught in a “time bind” between competing work and family obligations (Hochschild, 2001; Hochschild and Machung, 1997; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Milke and Peltola, 1999). The contemporary nexus between work and family is especially rife with gender conflict (Bianchi and Milke, 2010). And yet conflict is not inevitable; families articulate symbolic boundaries between work and family in diverse ways, on a continuum from separation to integration (Ba, 2011).

2.1. Work and family on farms

From a work-family perspective, the interplay between work and family on farms is unique because families concentrate consumptive and productive endeavors in the same physical space (Brandth, 2015). Families are able to adjust their own income needs and labor inputs in response to changing market conditions (Friedman, 1978). Yet at the structural level, transitions in the organization of family-based agriculture have often mimicked the trends in industrialization. Over time, the overall pattern has been a slow but steady move in U.S. agriculture from small-scale farming concentrated within households to large-scale industrial farming oriented to global markets (Constance et al., 2014; Strange, 1988). Correspondingly, farm families have consistently reorganized labor, often invoking gender specialization in divisions of labor, in response to changing market conditions (Brandth, 2002; Osterud, 2012).

Family adaptation to consolidation in the food industry has been uneven and most acutely documented at a few historical periods, suggesting flexibility and agency in farm families' strategies. For example, changes in wheat production between 1873 and 1935 led to the emergence of what Friedman (1978) describes as household specialized commodity production; farms exploited family labor rather than wage labor to adapt to changes in wheat prices in the

world market. Moreover, economic conditions do not affect all farm families equally. The Great Depression uprooted many farmers into a mass migration west, and yet in other places families increased small-scale farming activities to survive the crisis (Jones, 2002; Osterud, 2012; Rosenblatt, 1990). Post World War II was a critical time when farmers on the Great Plains consolidated into larger-scale operations (Grant, 2002), and when small farms in New York State felt increasing pressures to modernize (Osterud, 2012). Expansion in family farm operations later led to crisis during the 1980s and 1990s. The internationalization of agricultural markets resulted in drastic increases in interest rates, land prices and operation costs; families who had previously borrowed to expand operations experienced acute crisis (Conger and Elder, 1994; Dudley, 2000; Ortega et al., 1994; Rosenblatt, 1990). More recently, scholars describe a decline in mid-sized family farms in the U.S. as infrastructure in rural communities weakens (Guptill and Welsh, 2014). The increase in smaller size farms may be a product of what Guptill and Welsh (2014: 37) term the “erosion of the middle.”

Given variability in farm family adaptive strategies, changes in the gendered divisions of labor in twentieth century farming have been remarkably akin to those that occurred more broadly with industrialization. Historically, men have often been viewed as the patriarchal heads of farm and household, in charge of most decision-making processes (Garrett and Schulman, 1989; Wallace et al., 1994). Women's roles on farms were overlooked (Brandth, 2002; Bryant and Pini, 2011). Yet existing evidence suggests that even when women lacked many rights to control land, they typically had significant roles in subsistence oriented farming. More often than not, women on small farms did not operate in “separate spheres” in relationships with men and contributed significantly to family farm labor (Jones, 2002; Osterud, 2012). At the turn of the century in New York State, women and men were flexible about who worked off the farm to best make ends meet (Osterud, 2012). Once farms moved into profit oriented ventures, the division of labor in families became more specialized, and men and women performed more gender specific roles (Osterud, 2012).

Moreover, when farms expand, increasing production and employing non-family labor, family members may move into managerial positions, organizing labor according to corporatist principles (Gray, 2013; Holmes, 2013). In this sense, the farm becomes a workplace where different family members are employed. At one extreme, some may become what Magnan (2012) describes as a “vertically integrated family-based mega-farm,” completely separating a family's consumption and productive activities in the same way that industrialization pulled income generating activities outside the home. Others note the remarkable persistence of smaller-scale family farms (Brookfield, 2008). This may be due in large part to the roles of farm women who often adopt a third shift—maintaining family, farm and off-farm employment—to enable the continuation of family farming (Gallagher and Delworth, 1993; O'Hara, 1997; Scholl, 1983). In other cases, women take on administrative and management roles (O'Hara, 1997). Despite the “co-location” of work and family, like other modern families, farm families likely grapple to balance work and family resulting in both cooperation and family conflict.

3. New frontiers in family farming

The twenty-first century marks a shift towards increased social value in what some call an “emerging food culture” (Gagné, 2011; Gray, 2013; Schnell, 2007; Schor, 2011; Schor and Thompson, 2014). This significant cultural shift values food for factors beyond its affordability and nutrition, including those related to environmental sustainability, community justice, animal rights, and anti-

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