



Farmer autonomy and the farming self



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Drawing on interviews in Switzerland and New Zealand, we explore the concept of autonomy as part of a farming self. The farming self encompasses the dialectical relationship of autonomy as both value and tool that help us understand farmers within a wider set of economic, environmental and interpersonal relations. Farmers describe autonomy as a value in three related but slightly different ways. First, autonomy invokes a particular lifestyle connected to farming. Second, autonomy is understood as the equivalent of being one's own boss. Third, farmers describe autonomy negatively by enumerating the constraints that limit the first two iterations of autonomy in their farming operations. Beyond the value of autonomy for farmer identity, the farming self captures autonomy as a tool: a tool of identification, a tool to mitigate, navigate and translate the experiences of being a farmer in a wider network of agricultural relations.

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“... everybody delights in recognizing in the peasant the archetype of the independent free man who is his own master and whom the world proposes as the model for the alienated man, the ‘stranger,’ of modern technological civilization.”

Henri Mendras *The Vanishing Peasant*, p. 192 (Mendras, 1970)

1. Introduction

Discussions of personhood, agency, decision-making, (bio) ethics, freedom, citizenship, and independence intersect with autonomy in making sense of the individual within a confluence of economic, environmental and interpersonal relations. While the theoretical territory of autonomy is diverse, for now, our concern is articulating a theory of a relational farming self (Callero, 2003; Dunn, 1997) within a wider autonomy umbrella. We typically think of autonomy as a core value of one's identity (Hitlin, 2003). Is autonomy simply a core value of farmers? Or is there more to autonomy than just being an aspect of farmer identity? In a theory driven exploration of farmers in Switzerland and New Zealand we adapt the idea of the farming self (Burton, 2004a, b; Burton and

Wilson, 2006) to confirm autonomy's role as an important core value of farmer identity, but propose that autonomy is also employed as a social tool that dialectically reinforces that identity, while helping adapt to new contexts, realities, and practices. Thus autonomy is an integral part of being and (continuously) becoming a farmer. Our questions here revolve around how do farmers roll out autonomy in the service of not just maintaining their identity as “farmer,” but in order to maintain and build their relationship with the farm, the land, the animals, family members, neighbours, and all of the relationships connected to them? The value of examining how autonomy works in farmers lives tells us more about the interrelationship of self, identity and agency – not just for farmers, but the wider story of social life.

Autonomy is a key indicator of happiness for workers despite lower incomes or longer work hours (Helliwell et al., 2012). The value of autonomy (as control) is related throughout the sociology of work in many professions (Edgell, 2006; Grint, 2005; Lyness et al., 2012). Agriculture, that employs one of every three workers in the world, is no different (Bryant, 1999; Coughenour, 1995; FAO, 2012; Nettle et al., 2011). In Australia, researchers studied the retention of dairy farm employees and found that they valued autonomy, lifestyle, and decision making (Nettle et al., 2011). Farm owners found that the costs and shift in thinking to accommodate these needs were rewarded through more loyal and committed employees while also contributing to the (financial) stability of their operations. Autonomy provides meaning in farming regardless of scale (Gertel and Le Heron, 2011; Schneider and Niederle, 2010).

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While the large-scale/corporate and globally-engaged farming has increased (Cheshire and Woods, 2013), the inevitability of the loss of the peasants and family farms has not come to pass.

Our research experiences, in two different countries, revealed spontaneous discussions about autonomy. In this paper, we look at what leads to such similarity despite different milieus. We explore the use of autonomy as a tool that links farmers in Switzerland and New Zealand together. We develop the farming self in relation to three interrelated theoretical understandings of autonomy. This farming self *experiences* autonomy as a freedom to do things while also hoping for a freedom from other things. Autonomy is a tool to mitigate, navigate and translate the experiences of being a farmer in a wider network of agricultural relations. Thus, we expand the concept of the farming self, particularly as it relates to how farmers experience autonomy as both value and tool. To that end, we traverse the wider literature of the self and autonomy culminating in an extension of the farming self. We then illustrate a three-fold framework of autonomy that emphasizes the use of autonomy as a social tool to actively navigate the self and identity. We describe our methods and lay out the differences between the agricultural context in Switzerland and New Zealand, before exploring farmers' experiences of autonomy. By expanding our understanding of autonomy as a political tool we can better grasp its rhetorical employment in agriculture beyond a narrow interpretation of equating autonomy with entrepreneurship countered by La Via Campesina and other groups working for a wider interpretation of what qualifies as authentic farming.

2. Relating autonomy to the self

The self, as “a reflection of complete social process” (Mead, 2004: 224), helps delineate what is unique about people in relation to others – how they see themselves and how others see them and the interplay between the two. Thus, to understand the self, the (generalized) other is necessary, as the self is a relational process. The farmers we met expressed autonomy as a central element of their self-definition. The reflexive nature of the self highlights the complex (social) interplay of selfhood, identity and agency within the wider understanding of the person (see also Goffman, 1974). The various interpretations and experiences of autonomy among farmers – as persons and occupying a role – in different contexts highlights an interplay between the structural and the individual or “a critical ontology of ourselves” (Vrasti, 2011 : 9, following Foucault, 1997). As American rural sociologist Ken Wilkinson (1991) pointed out, “the self arises, has meaning, persists, and changes in social interaction” (p. 63). Thus the self is a reflexive construct both reflecting and shaping a person's entangled relations (Callero, 2003; Dunn, 1997). This permeability (Hitlin, 2003: 121) of relations entwines values, agency, and identity with the self where “Values and personal identity are linked at the theoretical level through the concept of authenticity” (p. 123).

While values are not prime movers, they are important because they “hold meaning for individuals” (p. 123). Within this entanglement, the self is stable but unfixed and thus takes constant work and judgement to maintain one's self regard (Rokeach, 1973: 216). The self is made and remade in the context of negotiating identity (one way of self-definition) and agency (via specific practices and performances) (constrained within those repertoires and possibilities afforded by the social context). Thus the identity, e.g. as a farmer, is a doing (Holloway, 2005), not a fixed sense of a role (Jenkins, 2008). In our formulation of the farming self, autonomy is one of the tools that people employ to maintain, adapt and express one's sense of self regard as a farmer whether they are changing the kinds of farming (Forney and Stock, 2014) or they are adapting to new playing fields (Stock et al., 2014).

What we show here is that the farming self is an example of the farmer pursuing (as a dynamic process) their own symbolic self-completion of their self-definition of farmer (Leary and Tangney, 2003a; Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Autonomy plays a peculiar role in this process as it is both a reference used to speak about what one is in comparison to the General Social Other (identification) (e.g. Weigert, 1991). Autonomy is also a dialectical tool of the self, a doing that works toward the expression of this agency. Autonomy provides room to manoeuvre in a context made of constraints. Thus, autonomy has to be understood as an important element of the self as a performative process in relation to agency.

The modern self embodies “the pressure to become what one is” (Elliott and Lemert, 2009: 68) and has become a defining feature of Western life. This “institutional individualization” (Beck, 1997) meshes with the responsabilisation (Foucault, 1976) that Emery (2013) disentangles with his discussion of individuality and individualism in farming. Autonomy, rather than privilege one over the other, helps emphasize the dialogic (Peter et al., 2000) characteristic of farmer practice and identity in relationship to structural changes. This takes autonomy beyond solely a value or trait of farmers and into the realm of a tool of social negotiation between self, identity and agency. The self is made and remade in the context of negotiating identity. The farmer self blends a farmer's self as an experiencing subject (Leary and Tangney, 2003b: 7) and the identity of farmer. Autonomy connects these expressions of a farmer that we see explicitly in our interviews. Thus, autonomy serves as a critical addition to understanding the self particularly in agriculture or the farming self.

3. Autonomy in farming

Like the changing nature of the self, the literature on autonomy continues to wrestle with the changes to the person in modernity. To better situate a formulation of the farming self (Section 4), we describe the importance of autonomy in farming. Farmers value their independence: this has been clearly stated in many national contexts (Dessein and Nevens, 2007; Droz and Forney, 2007; Emery, 2013; Kietäväinen, 2012; Niska et al., 2012). As a result, the independent farmer, with an emphasis on autonomy, remains a strong theme of peasant and agrarian conceptions of agriculture including for New Zealand and Switzerland. During the 20th Century, agrarian ideologists developed a description of the “Swiss Peasant” strongly connected to autonomy as a symbol of national identity and independence (Baumann, 1993; Forney, 2010). In former English colonies, the agrarian mythology focused on mentalities of self-help, independence and rugged individualism (Cheshire and Lawrence, 2005; Holowchak, 2011; Montmarquet, 1989). The ideology of freedom is equated with control – over nature, over the operation, and over success – typically affiliated with masculinity and its converse, the subordination or “housewifeisation” of women (Bell, 2004; Brandth, 2002; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999:98–100). The assertion of autonomy underlies assumptions of what comprises masculine and, therefore, authentic contemporary agriculture (Trauger et al., 2010). The idea of performing a masculinity involving control is particularly appropriate in New Zealand (Barlett and Conger, 2004; Campbell et al., 2006; Jay, 2005; Liepins, 2000). Independence and cooperation highlight a tension between individual success and the common good (Emery, 2013; Stock et al., 2014). Where Rosin (2008) argued for autonomy as a rationale for farmers' adjustments to new social arrangements of agriculture, we argue autonomy serves as a bedrock notion of a farming self. Beyond simply a moral value, autonomy also represents “a positive project of self-constitution” (see Cleaver, 1992: 129, quoted in Böhm et al., 2010: 20; Cleaver, 1992) (that parallels the room to manoeuvre) that serves to

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