



# Lands changing hands: Experiences of succession and farm (knowledge) acquisition among first-generation, multigenerational, and aspiring farmers<sup>☆</sup>

Michael Carolan

Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Family farm  
Succession  
Land tenure  
Beginning farmers  
First time farmers  
Attitudes  
Motivations  
Rural-urban interface  
Agricultural ladder

## ABSTRACT

Some are predicting that as much as 70% of the nation's farmland will exchange hands between 2011 and 2031 (Dean, 2011). Given these changes looming on the food horizon, there is a need to better understand the processes, barriers, and opportunities related to intergenerational farm transfer, especially at the rural-urban interface. I draw upon data collected through interviews with five distinct populations: first-generation farmer, beginning (FGB); first-generation farmer, experienced (FGE); multigenerational farmer, beginning (MGB); multigenerational farmer, experienced (MGE); and first generational farmer, aspiring (FGA). Two questions in particular are addressed: (1) what are the different values, motivations, and perceptions among FGB, FGE, MGB, MGE, and FGA toward farming and how do these experiences shape on-farm practices and (2) what are the barriers to farm entry (structural, economic, social and epistemic) and how have respondents worked to overcome them? The data used to explore these questions are drawn from semi-structured interviews with individuals from each of the aforementioned farm categories located near Omaha, Nebraska, or Des Moines, Iowa.

## 1. Introduction

Countries like the United States (US) are facing a tension that directly concerns food systems. To compound matters, this tension has yet to engender the same level of public or scholarly interest as matters relating to the “fork” end of the farm-fork continuum, where questions about food access, nutritional literacy, and food deserts have come to play a prominent role. The tension of which I speak lies in the topic of land tenure and farm succession.

According to Google, a proxy of sorts for our collective consciousness, food access is approximately twice as relevant (assuming relevance can be roughly approximated from search frequency) as land access. A search of “‘food access’ and ‘united states’” yielded 313,000 hits, compared to the 176,000 hits when the terms “‘land access’ and ‘united states’” were plugged into the search engine (the same search in Google Scholar generates a similar asymmetry).<sup>1</sup> Building upon existing scholarship on the subject (e.g., Conway et al., 2017; Gillespie and Johnson, 2016; Inwood et al., 2013; Joosse and Grubbström, 2017; McMillan, 2015), this paper examines the issues of land succession and farm acquisition through the experiences of those doing, or hoping to

do, agriculture: farmers and aspiring farmers.

The following points provide additional context.

- The average age among US farmers is increasing, which is presently just shy of 60. Operators 65 years and older are the fastest growing population of farmers (Obudzinski, 2016).
- The average age among non-operator farmland owners is also on the rise. In Iowa, for example, roughly 75 percent of all agricultural landlords are 65 years old or greater—18 percent are at least 85 years old (Zhang, 2014). These demographics help explain some analyses predicting that as much as 70 percent of the nation's farmland will change hands between 2011 and 2031 (Dean, 2011).
- While a massive land transfer looms, it has been estimated that only 23 percent will go to non-relatives (Obudzinski, 2016), meaning only a small portion will be available to beginning, non-heir farmers.

Meanwhile...

- For only the second time in the last century, the number of US

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported in part by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2016S1A3A2924243) and by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA-COL00725).

E-mail address: [Michael.Carolan@colostate.edu](mailto:Michael.Carolan@colostate.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Search conducted on August 18, 2017.

farmers under 35 years old is increasing, according to the USDA's Census of Agriculture (USDA, 2012).

- Interest in the profession among those from non-farm backgrounds is on the rise. A survey out of Canada found that among those who reported farming for less than 5 years, 30 percent claimed to be from farm operations while 60 percent had non-agriculture backgrounds. Meanwhile, the majority of those who had been farming for more than 10 years reported having been raised on a farm (Simpson 2015). This parallels the findings of a US survey conducted by the National Young Farmers Coalition, which found that the majority of young farmers did not grow up in agricultural families (Young Farmers Coalition, 2017). The survey also identified land access as the top challenge faced by beginning/aspiring farmers.
- The number of US farmers age 25–34 grew 2.2 percent between 2007 and 2012 (USDA, 2012).

Stated plainly, farmers, for a variety of reasons, are either unwilling or unable to leave agriculture. At the same time, interest among non-farmers toward agriculture has arguably never been higher—titles like the following, which appeared in a recent issue of *The Washington Post*, are common, “A growing number of young Americans are leaving desk jobs to farm” (Dewey, 2017). This paper works to help make sense of this tension, through the lived experiences of those on both sides of it.

To examine these values, motivations, and perceptions, I draw upon data collected through interviews with five distinct populations: first-generation farmer, beginning (FGB); first-generation farmer, experienced (FGE); multigenerational farmer, beginning (MGB); multigenerational farmer, experienced (MGE); and first generational aspiring farmer (FGA). The reference to “beginning” farmer refers to someone who has operated a farm or ranch for no more than ten consecutive years, which parallels the United State of Agriculture's (USDA's) definition (USDA, 2010). An “experienced” farmer, then, is someone with more than ten consecutive years of being a farm operator under her or his belt. To qualify as an “aspiring” farmer, someone must be actively pursuing agricultural land for production (the specifics of this category will be discussed shortly).

The future of land tenure and farm succession is further complicated at what has been called the rural-urban interface (RUI), “where the resilience of agriculture in an area vulnerable to nonfarm development is partially due to the widely varying social structures underlying the heterogeneous mix of commodity producers, urban oriented direct marketers and small-scale recreational farms found in these areas (Inwood et al., 2013: 347; see also Inwood and Sharp, 2012). The RUI is especially attractive to FGB, FGE, and FGA, as these individuals look for access into alternative value chains and markets, meaning that they generally desire smaller scale farms in proximity to metropolitan areas (Inwood et al., 2013; Inwood and Sharp, 2012). According to the earlier-mentioned survey by National Young Farmers Coalition (Young Farmers Coalition, 2017), the majority of beginning farmers, particularly those coming from non-farm backgrounds, are more likely than the general farming population to grow organically, limit pesticide and fertilizer use, diversify their crops or animals, and be deeply involved in their local food systems through community supported agriculture (CSA) programs and farmers' markets, which suggests strongly a need to farm land in the RUI. And yet, land can be especially elusive in the RUI due to colliding agricultural, residential, and commercial interests.

This paper is driven by two overarching research questions. What are the different values, motivations, and perceptions among FGB, FGE, MGB, MGE, and FGA toward agriculture and how do these experiences shape on-farm practices? Relatedly, what are the barriers to farm entry—structural, economic, social and epistemic—and how have respondents worked to overcome them? To explore these questions, I draw upon data gleaned from semi-structured interviews with farmers from each of the earlier-described categories operating (or wishing to operate) in the RUI adjacent to Omaha, Nebraska, or Des Moines, Iowa.

The paper continues with a review of relevant literature related to

land tenure, farm succession, and known barriers that can mediate these processes. Social and economic characteristics related to these processes will be identified, as will epistemic concerns. It is in the latter's spirit that the agricultural ladder will be introduced. The agricultural ladder has been used elsewhere to describe farm succession (e.g., Bates and Rudel, 2004; Spillman, 1919), though it does have its critics (e.g., Kloppenburg and Geisler, 1985). My interest in the concept lies in its largely unrecognized (save for, e.g., Carolan, 2011: 119–121) account of agriculture-based *knowledge* transmission for multi-generational farmers. This ought to lead us to ask: how do those without a farming background—without access to this “ladder”—learn to farm? And what of their children? Although beginning farmers are likely to be younger than established farmers, 35 percent of them—a figure that includes both first-gen and multi-gen—are over the age of 55, and nearly 13 percent are 65 or older (USDA, 2017a). We know socialization has historically played a key role in the farm succession process—that is, farm families socialize their children, to various degrees, into agriculture (Brandth and Overrein, 2013; Fischer and Burton, 2014; McMillan, 2015). If that socialization is not happening in more than a third of beginning farm households, due to the farmers' “children” being of teenage years (or adults who have moved out), then the same epistemic barriers challenging today's FGB could confront the next as the former's land transfers eventually to a new generation of FGB.

Following this review of related literatures, discussion turns to methods, after which comes a description of the findings. The paper concludes summarizing results while also offering some prescriptive suggestions, especially on how to facilitate knowledge transmission and co-creation among those not born into agriculture, with particular emphasis on non-white and/or non-male (aspiring) farmers. I discuss specifically the need to facilitate the creation of *welcoming communities of alternative food practices*: spaces and encounters where knowledge can be exchanged and gained, particularly among those for whom the agricultural ladder was elusive and where individuals feel accepted. The concept “communities of practice” refers to a network of like-minded and like-doing individuals who engage in active and collective learning to reproduce and/or co-create community-based understandings of what is and what ought to be (see e.g., Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Given the predicted widespread farm successions and corresponding changes in land tenure in the decades ahead, it is imperative that policymakers understand the processes, barriers, and opportunities related to intergenerational farm transfer, especially at the RUI where much of the future growth of local- and regional-facing value chains will be concentrated.

Before moving forward, allow me to discuss briefly some of the background assumptions driving this research and analysis. I personally favor, for a host of reasons, a farm landscape populated with farmers of differing ages with diverse commodities, production systems, marketing strategies, short and long supply chains, and so forth. I am therefore interested in identifying and overcoming barriers to achieve this end, versus a vision populated with only, say, large-scale or small-scale producers.

Additionally, I recognize that one can be a farmer without owning farmland. This paper, however, privileges a model where farmers own at least some of their land. The main reason for this is because that is what respondents wanted. Moreover, we know that long-term arrangements (either through ownership or long-term leases) are important for organic production and for production systems requiring capital-intensive infrastructure (Carolan, 2005). Non-farming land-owners are generally reluctant to lock in leases of sufficient length to justify some of these investments/improvements, leaving ownership as the only perceivable viable option for many growers (Carolan, 2005; Rotz et al., 2017). This is especially true at the RUI, where land prices are wildly unstable, driven in part by demand from non-farm actors (Rogus and Dimitri, 2015).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6545991>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6545991>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)