



Farm persistence and adaptation at the rural–urban interface: Succession and farm adjustment

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A B S T R A C T

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Despite assumptions that agriculture will automatically go into a mode of decline at the Rural Urban Interface (RUI), official statistics suggest that agriculture as a whole remains a strong (and in some cases a growing) industry in many U.S. RUI counties. RUI scholars have acknowledged internal family dynamics can significantly influence farm persistence and adaptation strategies, however, few studies have sought to document the specific role succession has on farm structure at the RUI. Building off rural geography models of farm organization at the RUI and succession research embedded in rural studies we analyze interviews from 33 U.S. farm families to 1) explore the relationship between farm adaptation and succession at the RUI, and 2) examine how succession is related to the different types of enterprises found at the RUI (direct marketers vs. commodity producers) and the types of growth strategies these farm families implement. We find that families who can not identify an heir either disinvest or enter a static management mode. Among farm families who can identify an heir we identify a variety of horizontal and vertical growth strategies (expanding, intensifying, and entrepreneurial stacking) designed to achieve farm reproduction goals. We discuss the theoretical and policy related implications of this research.

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1. Introduction

The relatively rural space on the edge of larger urbanized areas, or the rural–urban interface (RUI), is a complex landscape impacted by a variety of social and economic processes. The future of farming and the conversion of farmland to non-farm purposes has been a longstanding policy concern in these areas for over 40 years (Ilbery, 1985; Lisansky and Clark, 1987; Hines and Rhoades, 1994; Abdalla and Kelsey, 1996; Shumway and Otterstrom, 2001, 2004). The persistence and adaptation of farming is obviously impacted by land-use change and the rate of farmland loss (Ilbery, 1985), however, there are a myriad of factors that can influence farm enterprise adaptation (the ways farm families adjust their deployment of resources in response to changing and evolving conditions). For example, several critical factors that might impact farm enterprise adaptation include macro-level political and economic processes, biophysical resources, pressures from population growth and development, and household/family decisions (Heimlich and Anderson, 1987; Johnston and Bryant, 1987; Smithers and

Johnson, 2004). Further complicating any attempts to understand the influences on RUI agriculture is the fact there exist many different types of farming enterprises in these areas, including commodity producers, urban oriented direct marketers and small recreational farms, each with its own goals, opportunities and constraints.

In this research we focus on the influence of family factors, specifically how succession, affects the persistence and adaptation of farm enterprises in several Midwestern RUI counties of the United States. Access to farmland can be a major limitation at the RUI due to the competition between farm and non-farm development; additionally, several scholars have noted that more than cursory attention to intergenerational issues at the RUI is warranted due to the particular vulnerability of farmland being converted to non-farm uses during the phases of succession and inheritance (Hirschl and Long, 1993; Sharp and Smith, 2004). To guide this research, we draw on rural geography models of farm organization to identify some of the constraints RUI farms face and the possible adaptations they might implement.

While the role succession plays in agricultural adaptation and persistence at the RUI has been alluded to in the rural geography literature (Bryant, 1973; Johnston, 1989), it has not been examined in depth. Succession has been well studied by rural sociologists and anthropologists in rural areas and these studies consistently find

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that the family cycle is related to enterprise management and that succession has a direct influence on enterprise growth or decline (Bennett, 1982; Salamon, 1992; Gasson and Errington, 1993; Potter and Lobley, 1996; Stinglauer and Weiss, 2000). We anticipate that these findings are also applicable to RUI farms and expect succession to play a meaningful role in farm persistence and adaptation in these settings. However, we also anticipate that the dynamic nature of agriculture at the RUI, with substantial non-farm competition for land as well as access to urban consumer markets, might result in a greater range of growth and reproduction strategies than is commonly found in succession studies of rural, commodity farm families (Salamon, 1992).

The purpose of this study, is to examine how succession moderates the ways farms change and adapt to RUI conditions and ultimately how they continue to persist in these locations. In our research we explore two issues. First we simply seek to understand the relationship between farm adaptation and succession at the RUI. Second, we seek to understand how succession strategies are related to enterprise type (direct marketers vs. commodity) and the types of growth strategies farm families implement to incorporate the next generation given the land constraints and macro-political and economic frameworks they are embedded in.

This study of farm succession at the RUI is timely and necessary, and provides three especially salient contributions to the academic literature and the on-going policy dialogue regarding the future of agriculture at the RUI. First, our exploration and description of an important family farm-level process has implications for community and regional policy efforts to maintain agricultural viability at the urban edge. Second, we contribute to the process of model building and testing in rural geography by reviewing data that enables us to validate or refine existing conceptual models of RUI agricultural change. Finally, we expand our sociological and anthropological understanding of farm succession by reporting on how the process creates distinct adaptation patterns across different types of farm enterprises located at the RUI.

In the following section we explore the theoretical background for this work. We then report on data and findings collected through intensive interviews with Ohio and Michigan farm families located at the RUI in the United States. Interviews with family members associated with a variety of enterprises revealed a typology of strategies RUI farm families utilize to reproduce the farm enterprise for the next generation. We conclude with a summary of some of the disciplinary and policy implications of this research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The structure of agriculture at the RUI – Farm adaptation and persistence

The RUI is a zone of intermingling land-uses, characterized by an irregular transition from farm to non-farmland. A formal definition of the RUI is described in the methodology section below. The structure and character of agriculture in these regions is impacted both by non-metropolitan global agri-food system forces and by local metropolitan growth and development pressures (Berry, 1978; Ilbery, 1985; Shumway and Otterstrom, 2001; Shumway and Otterstrom, 2004). In addition to the influence of macro-level global factors and national commodity price support policies, farmers at the RUI must also contend with a number of problems arising from intermingling of farming and non-farm interests. Challenges can include: conflicts with non-farm neighbors over odor, noise; vandalism; local planning and zoning laws that fail to adequately support farming; and reduced access to suppliers, capital and traditional markets, such as grain elevators, due to declining local demand for farm services and steady increase of non-

farm residential and commercial business opportunities (Lopez et al., 1988; Hines and Rhoades, 1994; Kelsey and Singletary, 1996; Kelsey, 1998).

While these challenges can appear daunting, the seeds of this research were planted by a disjuncture we observed (and which has been noted by others, e.g. Daniels (1999)) between a sense of fatalism regarding the future of agriculture that sometimes permeates farmland preservation and land-use policy discussions and our on the ground observations that a significant amount of farming persists even in the face of urban encroachment. While some farmers and non-farmers alike may believe that traditional “family farming” is no longer viable in the modern U.S. economy, (Jackson-Smith, 1999), official statistics indicate that agriculture remains a strong (and in some cases growing) industry in many U.S. RUI counties (Butler and Maronek, 2002; Jackson-Smith, 1999; Clark et al., 2010).

Jackson-Smith and Sharp, (2008) identify a relatively large set of counties located at the RUI with substantial agricultural production, with 41 percent of total U.S. agricultural sales originating from these counties in 2007 (Jackson-Smith and Sharp, 2008). These counties also represent critical food producing regions of the U.S., accounting for 78 percent of U.S. vegetable production and 91 percent of U.S. fruit production (Jackson-Smith and Sharp, 2008). Compared to more rural areas, farming operations at the RUI tend to be highly diverse, with more than three-quarters of U.S. organic and direct sales originating from RUI counties (Jackson-Smith and Sharp, 2008). These statistics demonstrate the dynamic nature of agriculture at the RUI as it is a location not only of constraint but also of great opportunity. Several studies have documented the heterogeneous nature of agriculture at the RUI by identifying a mixture of commercial commodity farms as well as adaptive and recreational farms (farms reporting less than \$10,000 in sales (Heimlich and Brooks, 1989)) that are exploiting opportunities to direct market farm products to nearby urban populations. (Butler and Maronek, 2002; Johnston and Bryant, 1987; Heimlich and Brooks, 1989).

2.2. Farm adaptation models

Several models rooted in agricultural geography have emerged to account for the structure of RUI agriculture (Ilbery, 1985; Johnston and Bryant, 1987; Bryant and Johnston, 1992). These models not only recognize the influence of economic factors, but also incorporate elements of culture, land tenure, succession, community, agroecology, biophysical resources, and macroeconomic structural influences operating at global, national, regional and local scales (Johnston and Bryant, 1987; Smithers and Johnson, 2004). Additionally, an important theme implicit in these models is the expectation that urban oriented food and fiber production strategies are likely to emerge and succeed due to their proximity to urban markets (Bowler, 1999; Fennell and Weaver, 1997; Heimlich and Anderson, 2001). We review the insights of three distinct RUI models, each of which acknowledges the broad range of adaptive strategies that can vary across different types of farms and communities.

The first model, developed by Heimlich and Brook's (1989), identifies the relationship between farm type and persistence. The model anticipates three different types of RUI farms, including: i. alternative enterprises (small in size with high value outputs); ii. recreational enterprises (very small scale, operated by hobby farmers) and; iii. traditional enterprises (larger operations engaged in conventional commodity production). Research focusing on these various types of enterprises suggests that alternative enterprises in metropolitan counties were most likely to persist between 1978 and 1997 compared to either traditional or recreational enterprises (Heimlich and Anderson, 2001; Hoppe and Korb, 2001).

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