

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

DATE: April 17th, 2015

AUTHOR: Hope Perez

TITLE: New to Farming: Exploring the motivations and experiences of small-scale farmers in Nova Scotia

DEPARTMENT OR SCHOOL: College of Sustainability

DEGREE; Bachelor of Arts

Convocation: May 2015

Environment, Sustainability and
Society and Social Anthropology,
Minor in Journalism Studies

Permission is herewith granted to Dalhousie University to circulate and to have copied for non-commercial purposes, at its discretion, the above title upon the request of individuals or institutions. I understand that my thesis will be electronically available to the public.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

The author attests that permission has been obtained for the use of any copyrighted material appearing in the thesis (other than the brief excerpts requiring only proper acknowledgement in scholarly writing), and that all such use is clearly acknowledged.

Signature of Author

**New to Farming: Exploring the motivations and experiences
of small-scale farmers in Nova Scotia**

By Hope Perez

Under the supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Fitting

Honours Thesis in Environment, Sustainability and Society
In partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Combined Honours)

Dalhousie University
April 2015

Table of Contents

Abstract	II
Acknowledgements.....	III
Introduction.....	1
<i>Research Purpose</i>	3
<i>Definition of Terms</i>	4
<i>Limitations</i>	5
Literature Review	6
Methods	10
Profiles	13
Themes.....	17
<i>Health and the Environment</i>	17
<i>Farming as a Political Act</i>	19
<i>Value of Practical Learning and Apprenticeships</i>	22
<i>Entrepreneurship</i>	25
Discussion	27
Conclusion	31

Abstract

The romanticism of rural landscapes was an essential aspect of the 1960s and 1970s back-to-the-land movement. Urbanites flocked to rural spaces as an escape from the plight of humanity in cities. In the contemporary back-to-the-land movement, perceptions of the rural utopian idyll influence the use of rural spaces. Farmers have the unique opportunity to express their conceptions of rural life through farming methods. This study explores the motivations, barriers and challenges of small-scale farming in Nova Scotia. Six neo-farmers, meaning those who do not come from family farming backgrounds, were interviewed about their experiences. Farmers belong to a community of small-scale, alternative producers that rely on markets and community-supported agriculture. There was a clear transition from understanding farming as a lifestyle choice versus farming as source of income. Farmers were predominately motivated by health and environmental concerns. This study also explores farmers' attitudes toward farming as a political act.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Fitting for providing guidance throughout the year. I am equally grateful for the insight of Susan Tirone, Andrew Bergel and Tetjana Ross.

I also extend my gratitude to the farmers and organizations that allowed me to explore the farming community in Nova Scotia. Interviews were the essence of this research project.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

Introduction

In August of 2014, a New York Times article begged parents to dissuade their children from aspiring to be farmers. Smith (2014), who is a farmer, called small scale farming “the dirty secret of the food movement” (para. 2). Non-profit farms, large-scale industrial agriculture, hobby farms and the rising cost of farm operations are threatening today’s farmers (Smith, 2014). Despite the issues presented by Smith, Canada is facing a need for a more agricultural producers. According to census data, 48.3% of Canadian farmers were 55 or older in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2014). Additionally, the number of farmers in Canada decreased by 10.1% between 2006 and 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2014). Despite the importance of growing food, agriculture is not a desirable career path for many. Nova Scotia currently has several programs such as ThinkFarm and ACORN’s Grow A Farmer that support new entrants into the agricultural sector. Understanding the motivations and challenges of starting a farm can aid these programs in assisting new farmers.

Even with a decline in Canadian farmers, food has taken a permanent seat in mainstream culture. Communities and individuals are concerned with where their food comes from and how it is grown. Even the smallest details of our everyday lives have become more politicized; the types of food we eat have become a symbol of our political values. Food choices reveal your connections to community, social class and the amount of social capital you embody. “Our desire for better food, more information and choices, and preference for local action and personal involvement” reflect a growing awareness of the food system and the

power of consumerist choice (Hamilton, 2011, p. 118). While the dynamic between food production and consumer trends has been studied heavily, the attitudes and motivations of farmers are often ignored. Of particular interest is the way in which inexperienced beginners, known as neo-farmers, embrace the agricultural industry. Exploring how their ideals or motivations are challenged throughout the process can contribute to existing knowledge surrounding contemporary farmers.

Food activism is essential to understanding the evolving discussion around food in contemporary culture. It is a political and social movement that spans the globe and seeks to modify the ways in which food is produced, distributed and consumed (Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2013, p.3). The literature concerning new farmers refers to the alternative communities sought out by organic or alternative farmers. Alberto Mulecci's "regressive utopianism" is defined as "the modification of the modern food system using older agrarian systems" (Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2013, p.27). Understanding farmers' motivations related to global movements such as food activism may be an excellent way to situate farmer's individual experiences. This may clarify whether their motivations are rooted in aspects of political activism.

Research Purpose and Question

As the average age of Nova Scotia's farmers continues to grow, the motivations that drive new farmers are becoming more important (Grow A Farmer, 2014). This study aims to achieve a better understanding of why individuals without an agricultural background begin farming as a career. In an effort to understand the everyday life experiences of new farmers, this research will explore the motivations, challenges, and barriers associated with beginning farming in Nova Scotia. Farmers have the potential to interact and express their political or life philosophies through their farming practices and relationships with the farming community. The primary research question is: When non-farmers take up farming, is it a form of ethical or political dissatisfaction with the dominant food system? Secondary questions will investigate motivations and experiences of farmers, and whether this shows a new wave of a back-to-the-land, rural utopian movement occurring in Nova Scotia's farming community.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are essential to the discussion of food activism and agriculture. These terms can mean many things, depending on the specific theoretical lens applied to this topic. For the purpose of this research, the following definitions were used.

Food Activism is an attempt by individuals or a group to change global food networks by “modifying the way they produce, distribute and/or consume food” (Counihan & Siniscalchi, 2014, p. 3).

New farmer/neo-farmer is an individual without a family history or background in farming. Agriculture can be a secondary career or represent a shift in lifestyle for these farmers (Mailfert, 2007).

Food sovereignty is a term attributed to the Via Campesina organization. It is the right to access healthy and culturally appropriate food that was produced in an ethical and sustainable way (WHO, 2014, para. 2).

Locavore is an emerging counterculture concerned with the miles food travels from ‘farm to table’. Those involved in this movement strive to solely consume foods that are made or produced locally and thus influence the industry through environmentally conscious consumerism.

Limitations of the Study

This study will assess the motivations and barriers experienced by new farmers in Nova Scotia. Due to the limited amount of time and resources available, this study will only explore a small sample of the population. Interviews will be conducted with individuals and experts associated with small-scale farming in Nova Scotia. As such, there is the potential for biased results. In an attempt to avert this bias, this research will be compared to existing literature concerning new farmers. As with any qualitative study, there is the potential for researcher bias. By grounding the analysis in the lived experiences of informants, all attempts will be made create an accurate representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the risk associated with an aging population, the French government began a funding program for new farmers. Mailfert's (2007) research separates farmers based on their agricultural backgrounds, farmers who have a family history of farming, and neo-farmers who come from non-agricultural backgrounds. Neo-farmers were predominately engaged with forms of alternative agriculture (Mailfert, 2007). Mailfert's study explored the types of networks constructed by farmers from different backgrounds. The importance of farmer-to-farmer interactions was highly valued by all groups. Although, "the 'neo-farmers' by definition lacked this kind of family social capital: 'when you're not born here it takes years to find the folks you can trust'..." (Mailfert, 2007, p. 27). Those with farming backgrounds had established ties in the community. Finding avenues to create stronger ties within the community lead to greater success for neo-farmers (Mailfert, 2007).

Hetherington's (2005) *Cultivating Utopia* focuses on the experiences of organic farmers in Nova Scotia, although a few conventional farmers were contacted. Farmer's were interviewed concerning their capacity for community building and personal experiences after entering agriculture. His informants spoke about the self-doubt and moral questions they experienced as organic farmers (Hetherington, 2005). Individuals who move to rural spaces are often motivated by the "sociocultural constructions of rurality" in which rural spaces are associated with a simpler way of life (Halfacree & Rivera, 2011, p. 96). Hetherington writes, "A great deal of the organic farmers' energy is put into fortifying local communities, building small scale social spheres that allow a certain autonomy from the forces of global economies" (Hetherington, 2005, p. 30). The distinction between conventional and organic farmer is repeatedly mentioned in

farmer interviews. Organic farmers built communities on the outskirts of the previously established farming community. In Hetherington's (2009) survey, organic farmers had been operating a family farm for an average of 8 years. This is considerably less than the average conventional family farm, where ownership had spanned an average of seventy-five years. In addition, organic farmers were more likely to come from an urban upbringing. In fact, "of the ten organic growers, six households come from entirely urban backgrounds" (Hetherington, 2005, p. 47). All farmers own farms that are in rural regions. Given the findings of Hetherington and others there is a clear disparity between rural idyll and reality.

A generous portion of the literature related to neo-farmers discusses the legacy of the back-to-the-land movement. The movement rose to popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, but is rooted in literature from the early 1900s such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (Brown, 2011). Early 19th century romanticism championed the authentic rural lifestyle of European peasants (Hetherington, 2005). In North America, the back-to-the-land movement symbolized a rejection of urban life in exchange for rural communal living. Hetherington (2005) argues that this hunt for an ideal rural community is an expression of ecological utopianism. This utopian vision suggests that a vital piece of society was lost due to industrialization but may be recovered by a change in human action. The environmental movement of the contemporary era has reimagined humanity's responsibility to nature, including the way food is produced. In his exploration of organic farmers, Hetherington (2005) purposes that utopianism has affected their world-views in relation to farming practices and community organization. As insurgent activists, neo-farmers demonstrate "human capacity for intentional action" (Hetherington, p. 11).

The hunt for a more meaningful life in rural spaces is at the heart of Halfacree's (2007) "radical rural" in which rural life is reimagined using an activist model. Supporters of the rural idyll reject the super-productivist model where usage of rural spaces depends on the industrialization of agriculture (Halfacree, 2007). Industrialization of agriculture has forced some farmers to rely on GMOs and monoculture to maintain the financial viability of farming. Instead, these farming methods lead to degradation of the soil and actually harm the future of farming in rural spaces. Producers and consumers are revitalizing agriculture by transcending the super-productivist model. The radical rural or rural idyll "idealises the small-scale family farm as the site and medium of socially just, economically sound and ecologically sustainable agricultural frame" (Trauger, 2006, p. 10).

Trauger's exploration of the "agrarian dream" reaffirmed the changing culture in agricultural communities. Her research identified three manifestations of agriculturists: large-scale commodity driven farmers, environmental and social idealists, and disaffected urban dwellers seeking refuge in rural life. The idealists caught between the two extremes fit into the radical rural. It should be noted that these ideals are not contained within rural spaces. Producer and consumers are reconfiguring the food system through alternative food networks that seek to reverse the ills of large-scale farming on health and the environment. By the "re-construction of the agrarian dream" the contemporary back-to-the-land movement is a reflection of and "inseparable from a larger-scale social movement towards ecological sustainability" (Trauger, 2006, p. 10). The popularity of organic food, the locavore movement, 'eating clean' and the 100-mile diet are reflections of emerging food activism in Western countries.

According to Wilbur (2013), “While looking backward to disappearing ways of life, contemporary back-to-the-landers simultaneously keep focused on the future, their homesteads anticipating a world of food and oil shortages, local economies, self-reliance and the collapse of a status-conscious consumer culture” (p. 151). As part of a larger environmentalist movement, back-to-the-landers seek to create new markets and local communities that are holistic and self-sufficient. The world is absorbing natural resources at an unsustainable rate and cities are growing exponentially. Back-to-the-landers prescribe a deeper connection with alternative modes of living in order to rid themselves of a discomfort with life in the 21st century. In a study conducted on farmers’ motivations, Mzoughi (2011) found that “not feeling guilty about one’s choices only influences adoption of organic farming” (p. 1540). Farmers are also likely to adopt alternative methods to demonstrate their dedication to others’ wellbeing. (Mzoughi, 2011, p. 1543). In a way, this demonstrates how there is a growing discomfort with the status quo. Neo-farmers and organic farmers are only a small piece of a larger network of resisters.

METHODS

Data was collected through one-on-one interviews with new farmers in Nova Scotia. My role as interviewer and the primary researcher was to facilitate the interview process. Questions were open-ended and open to the interpretation of the farmers. This technique is based on a constructionist worldview, in that participants construct meanings or understanding of the world through their own experiences (Creswell, 2010). Several questions framed the themes of the interview - motivations, challenges, and political activism. Follow up questions were used to clarify responses or elaborate on a specific theme. In this way, a semi-structured interview allowed for guided story collecting and the ability to build a collective narrative throughout the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The goal of the interview was to allow a space for participants to voice their own opinions and to share their experiences in their own unique way. The creation of a narrative links this interview process to the phenomenological approach (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this case, interviews were a way to understand political activism or expression of phenomena through the lived experiences of farmers' motivations and everyday lives.

Recruitment was conducted via regional farmers' networks and farmers' markets in Halifax, NS. The target population sample is six farmers. Recruitment is based on the following criteria: farms must be in Nova Scotia and farmers cannot be from an agricultural background (i.e. have spent their childhood on a farm). Aspiring farmers may be included in research. While the study is not specifically aimed at aspiring farmers, they can provide insight into the

motivations of new farmers. The sample size was selected given the capacity of an undergraduate thesis. There is neither enough time nor funding to conduct a study of a larger scale. The goal is to present an exploratory study of new farmers' motivations and challenges rather than produce conclusions about the entire agricultural community.

All participants were asked for consent before recording responses. By using a recording, interviews allowed conversation to flow more freely. Consent forms were made available to all participants before interviews were conducted. Each interview was approximately one hour long. Ideally, some interviews would be conducted in person but many were conducted over the phone. In person interviews can provide subtle visual details. Site visits were difficult, given on the distance of farms from Halifax.

The purpose of recording and transcribing interviews was to analyze and code responses more effectively. The coding technique evolved with the study. All coding was done by hand. Coding sought common words or phrases used by participants. Additionally, analysis was informed by literature related to political activism, food activism and the back-to-the-land movement. Data was interpreted using grounded theory, which is a common mode of analysis in qualitative research (Adler & Clark, 2003). The purpose of grounded theory is to draw conclusions, themes and relationships based inductively through evidence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Grounded theory was chosen to allow for flexibility in the research. It allows common themes to come directly from interviews. In this way, unexpected themes would not be missed during data collection. Interviews were semi-structured to allow informants maximum opportunity to

express their experiences and motivations. Interview questions were informed by academic literature. According to Adler & Clark (2003), coding in grounded theory can be concept or data driven. This study will utilize both methods to ensure the validity of research.

PROFILES

The voices and experiences of each informant were the backbone of this research project. Six farmers and two representatives agreed to an interview. As such, it is necessary to briefly profile each farmer or representative individually while using pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms is commonly used in the dissemination of qualitative data.

Emma spent her childhood in a suburban community. At 18, she became interested in holistic nutrition. Farming offered a lifestyle where she could pursue her interests in nutrition and food. “I thought that farming would be healthy lifestyle choice for myself, ... the environment, the planet, other species and it would contribute to a healthier life for other people through providing either food or medicine in the form of herbs.” Emma apprenticed on farms, both abroad and in Canada, for a number of years before embarking on her own venture with her partner in 2011. Apprenticing offered a way for Emma to learn practical and business skills needed to run a successful farm. Their current farm produces vegetables, herbs, flowers, and some fruits. They also have laying hens on the property. Their farm is certified organic by Ecocert Canada. In tune with this farming philosophy, the property is also a certified bee friendly farm, meaning that crops and land are used in a way that encourages pollination.

James had a backyard garden and chickens during his childhood. He grew up around farmers, and was exposed to progressive ideas around food due to his parents’ ownership of one of the first chains of health food stores in Massachusetts. He had been farming for many years before taking over a farm in Hants County, Nova Scotia in 2011.

The farm is 90 acres in total - 30 acres are forested, 30 acres are salt marsh and the remaining third is pasture. Six or seven acres of the pasture are dedicated to horticulture, while the rest is pasture land for cattle and chickens. Farming has offered James an “oasis from what seems to be increasing troubles and injustice.” Some of the farm’s revenue comes from a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program. CSAs offer a way for consumers to support farmers in exchange for a set amount of goods per week.

Julia grew up in a small town surrounded by agriculture in Iowa. Julia commented, “I grew up in an agricultural environment but I didn’t partake in it.” Along with her partner, Julia has been farming for three years. In the first year, they started by casually selling produce from the end of their driveway. The farm is a mere half-acre yet they produce vegetables, greens, herbs and flowers using organic methods. Julia is one of the few second career farmers involved in this research study. Her experience in the creative business world has allowed her to market and create a brand for the farm and its goods. As a fairly new farmer, Julia relies on the farming community and farming organizations to learn necessary skills. Despite growing her farm and selling at the market, Julia and her partner still consider themselves aspiring farmers.

Alice is starting her seventh season farming in Nova Scotia. She currently owns a horticulture farm on four and a half acres of land. At 20 years old, Alice was unsatisfied with her traditional university education and decided to take a different route. Alice explained, “I fell in love with farming...I wanted to spend my life doing something meaningful.” Following an eight month farming program, Alice worked on farms in

British Columbia. During that time, she began to understand what it took to run a viable small-scale farm. “It gave me a model to move forward with my own farm. I knew systems that would work. Also for me, since leaving that farm I have an excellent farm mentor.” Her farm is certified organic by Ecocert Canada. Revenue is generated through a CSA, selling at markets, and wholesale.

Cara was working in the retail and marketing industry before farming. Her interest in food transformed into a passion for personal care products. Her goat farm produces soaps, shampoo, lotion and other products. Cara is one of the second career farmers involved in this research study. “My expertise came from branding and marketing.” Rather than apprenticing on farms, Cara relies on home research, online classes and personal care experts to create “value-added products.”

Georgia needed a drastic change in her life. She decided it was time to start a farm instead of working in an office. Motivated by health and nutrition, it seemed that an organic farm would be the best choice. Georgia’s farm in West Hants, Nova Scotia is 75 acres. The farm’s meat, poultry and vegetables are sold through a CSA and at a farmer’s market in the province. In the beginning, Georgia felt that farming was a “good old boys club.” As the primary farmer, Georgia learned the basics from other farmers, her mentor and farmer organizations.

Katherine works for an organization that supports new and aspiring farmers throughout the Atlantic Provinces. This organization offers a number of education opportunities including conferences, workshops and mentorship programs.

Isabelle works for an organization funded by the Nova Scotian government. This organization focuses on entrepreneurship related to agriculture and food related ventures. They provide beginner farmers with a guide to starting a farm business and connect them with helpful resources within the Department of Agriculture. She grew up on a dairy farm and attended the Nova Scotia Agricultural College in Truro, Nova Scotia that is now the Faculty of Agriculture at Dalhousie University. Isabelle is currently a sheep farmer along with her duties as a coordinator at the organization.

THEMES

While it is important to recognize the diversity in farmer's experiences, common themes arose from the interview process. By exploring these emergent themes, we may begin to explore the changing dynamics of farming communities.

Health and Environment

For many family farmers, land, and more importantly, farming knowledge, is inherited. New farmers must learn a great deal before pursuing farming as a career. There were two motivators that were mentioned by farmers during the interviews: health and the environment. These themes were typically interconnected but they were expressed in a few different ways. Ultimately, farmers who cited health and the environment as motivators began farming as a lifestyle choice. Farming is not an easy task but it offers a desired lifestyle that includes hard work and a deeper connection to nature.

“I was thinking about the lifestyle of living on a farm - waking up in the morning, being somewhere rural and beautiful, going outside and doing work that was physical in nature and was able to add biodiversity to the land and to take care, to build the soil.” (Emma)

Sometimes the reality of life on a farm is that revenue isn't enough to cover all expenses. For example, Sarah still classifies herself as an aspiring farmer because it is not her sole source of income. While they have expanded their farm and go to market every week, Sarah and her partner still have off-farm jobs that supplement their farm income. Their decision to farm grew from an interest in growing food.

“I started with having a backyard garden before I got into growing things commercially and I think the excitement of growing my own food

and having my food in my backyard was what really got me excited to pursue growing food on a larger scale.” (Alice)

Isabelle spoke about the difficulty for aspiring farmers to leave their former careers. The high labour and time needed to start a successful farm enterprise makes it difficult to balance start-up with the demands of a second job. “They can’t jump from a full time income because they are not making enough money farming,” said Isabelle.

All farmers interviewed own small-scale farms that each occupies a place in niche markets. Rather than pursuing conventional farming operations, these farmers have created a role within the changing paradigms of food culture. Their initial attraction to the farming lifestyle has undoubtedly affected how they farm. For these farmers, growing food has become a way to positively interact with the environment. On Emma’s farm, building up the fertility of the soil and providing a productive space for all species is an important mandate. “We are always thinking of ways we can enhance the farm for the other species that live here and also to reduce the damage to the lifestyles of other species and their habitat,” said Emma.

In terms of health, growing crops provided individuals with a direct connection to their food. For some, this connection arose from an interest in nutrition. Georgia was motivated by her personal health and “never sitting behind a desk again”. She evaluated her health needs, and realized it was “time to smarten up” and pursue her interest in farming. After researching health and nutrition, organic farming seemed right.

For Julia, growing food for others continues to be a motivator. Contributing to the health of the community is one of the outcomes of growing food. She commented,

“Initially, I wanted to grow things. I was excited to grow all these amazing things I'd never grown before. As I keep going, I get really excited about people telling me how delicious their food is. Like when they have our greens and they are so excited and they feel nourished or

how their meals are delicious. I get excited about hearing how excited other people are about what we are going. There is a lot of motivation around that.”

Farmers also expressed a concern for the world and their local habitats. As previously mentioned, many farmers view their farm as an ecosystem, rather than land strictly for food production. Emma stressed the importance of a holistic approach to farming. She discussed a relationship with agriculture that incorporates permaculture methods. Permaculture is the practice of mimicking patterns and relationships found in nature. This encourages an appreciation of a habitat’s natural cycles. For example, if pests do arrive, there is the assumption that their predators will be close behind, and that a natural balance will be achieved.

Farming as a Political Act

One of the main purposes of this research was to explore the connection between farming and food justice. Society is becoming increasingly concerned about where food comes from and how it is grown. There is evidence of this in Halifax, where the locavore movement is thriving at markets and new restaurants. Neo-farmers had lived in cities previously and depend on urban population for business. They make up one section of the new entrant population in Nova Scotia. Katherine commented on this phenomenon in her interview,

“On one hand, we see a group of people that are connected to long-standing family farms that are coming from larger scale, industrial farms. In comparison, we are seeing an emerging group of new entrants that are often coming from non-family farm backgrounds, often from urban environments with post-secondary educations that are looking to agriculture as a way to enact positive and tangible impacts on the consequences of the industrial food system.”

Many farmers expressed interest in practicing alternative agriculture. Katherine stressed this emerging groups has cited “more interest in farming as a political act.”

According to Julia, small-scale farmers are growing in parallel to the locavore movement. Their participation in markets and farmer’s organizations puts them at the centre of food politics. She said, “I tend to see smaller farms as the people who are at the farmers’ market or using CSAs [Community Supported Agriculture]. The way I see it, if you are going that route you are very much a part of the movement.” Farmers suggested that farming was a way to do something meaningful and enact change in a positive way. Their interest in change is motivated by concern for the environment and health. Managing small-scale farms has become a way to revitalize the food system. New farmers have taken up the role of insurgent architects, “who confront the world having already raised in their imaginations a vision of social justice, whose lives are lived according to models of what could be,” (Hetherington, 2005). Farmers expressed a discontent with the dominant food system, suggesting that farming offers an outlet to express the need for transformation.

“I could see the changes that were happening in the world and they were not particularly positive. For me, activism in the form of protesting or organizing meetings around issues wasn’t enough for me ... I needed to do something constructive on the ground that felt positive ... Growing food just felt so fundamental and meaningful.” - Alice

James echoed Alice’s sentiments in his interview. He commented, “I’m deeply concerned with so much of what is going on with the world. I honestly don’t think farming is going to change much but it offers an oasis from what seems to be increasing troubles and injustice.”

For others, it was important to be involved with farmer organizations. Emma and her partner viewed their involvement as a way to be aware of changes in policy. Joining

organizations allowed them to mitigate potential risks. In 2014 the National Farmers Initiative released a series of reports on the challenges and opportunities for new farmers in Canada. The newly formed National New Farmers Coalition and the University of Manitoba are also conducting research pertaining to the needs of new farmers. They hope to survey 1,000 new, aspiring, or recently exited farmers in Canada to assess the needs of farmers. This survey will inform the *National New Farmers Policy Platform*. These formal examples demonstrate the space being made for new entrants in policy-making. Alice's involvement with the National Farmers' Union is an investment in the future of her business. She believes that,

“The political side of farming is key and you need to take action otherwise we will be strategically eliminated from the Canadian rural economy. I've learned how important that political side of farming is, how political farming is and how to take action on that level.”

Organizations led by farmers tended to be more accessible to new entrants because they demonstrated flexibility in response to the demands of the growing season. They gather during the winter months, while farmers are preparing for the upcoming season. Organizations allow new entrants to create or join existing farmer networks across the country. Emma said, “It helps me feel really inspired that what we are doing is part of a larger picture of agriculture and the country. That there are people across the country and the world doing similar things to us and that our voice is meaningful.” Farmers felt that it was important to establish networks locally, provincially and nationally.

Farmers expressed two ways in which farming is connected to food politics. The most obvious is participation in farmers' organization such as the National Farmers' Union or New Farmers' Coalition. These interviews revealed that farmers also have the

ability to take action through actual modes of agriculture. As insurgent activists, farmers may reshape agriculture in Canada through a network of alternative farming. Katherine raised an important question that highlights the role of farming as a political act when she said,

“Who is going to grow our food in this region? Or are we going to have to become dependent on importing food that can be grown here? [Food] from large industrial farms that aren’t promoting biodiversity, habitat, nutrition or producing a variety of things rather than a single crop.”

What Katherine seeks is the manifestation of the rural agrarian idyll. In other words, a shift away from conventional monoculture and increased support for small-scale farmers dedicated to an environmentally conscious food network. Supporters of alternative agriculture, ecological citizenship, agricultural sustainability and food activism equally question the future of food production.

The Value of Practical Learning & Apprenticeships

The foundation of a successful farm operation is demonstrating the essential practical skills to grow food and manage the land. In interviews, farmers indicated that they found the most valuable lessons via farmer-to-farmer networks. These networks include workshops, conferences, and apprenticeships. The majority of first career farmers involved with the study apprenticed or worked on farms before embarking on their own ventures. This provided farmers with fundamental practical skills that reduced capital costs. As with many new businesses, “experience can replace money and money can replace experience,” said Emma. Many of the farmers recommended that at least 2-3 years be devoted to working or apprenticing on a farm. This practice is key to gaining knowledge from mentors, and benefiting from generations of farming

knowledge. Observing how something is done first hand can be a crucial experience for a young farmer. Isabelle and Katherine cited loss of knowledge as one of the primary concerns of their organizations. As the average farmer in Canada gets older, the potential for lost information rises.

“I think that apprenticeships are really key ... if you want to learn about farming you need to learn on a farm. By working with those people who are most familiar about agriculture within a given region are farmers. Making those direct connections is really key,” said Katherine.

Apprenticeships are a way to increase success once new farmers are on their own. For the first career farmer, learning the essential skills can determine the longevity of their farm. Unfortunately while these experiences are important, most farm jobs pay very little money or nothing at all. Apprenticing can be eye opening for aspiring farmers because it prepares them for reality of making a career out of farming. Apprenticeships can ease the transition from a life in a city or suburb to life on a farm. Emma’s time apprenticing has helped her value the life she has built so far,

“When we worked on other farms, we were getting paid a little bit or maybe nothing. Regardless of what we got paid, we would usually live in shared housing, a cabin or a tent, once I lived in the top of a barn; all kinds of different ways of living that to me as a young person seemed awesome and fun. So now that we have a house, it’s not a super fancy house but to us this is, besides our childhood with our parents, the most awesome place we have ever lived,” said Emma.

For Alice, working on a farm allowed her to shift from theoretical knowledge to practical skills.

“I found work in Interior BC at a farm that was financially viable and a similar model to what I could imagine myself doing. It was a certified organic, twenty-acre farm in the interior. I worked there for five years or five seasons and winters. I really was able to put the pieces that I had been learning at Linnea into practice.”

James stressed the importance of gaining practical skills early on, especially for neo-farmers. He identifies with the new generation of farmers that are coming from cities.

He said,

“It’s amazing when I see young people come to the farm who come from the city. That was my background. I hadn’t used a chainsaw until I was probably twenty-four years old...it’s amazing, it’s a whole different skill set. Some of the things that we are good at growing up in a white collar world just aren’t that useful.”

While first career farmers relied heavily on work experience, second career farmers sought information from farmer organizations, workshops and conferences in addition to mentors. None of the second career farmers in this study apprenticed before starting their farms. They all attended workshops organized by the Atlantic Canadian Organic Regional Network (ACORN). Georgia felt that farming was a “good old boys club” when she began farming nine years ago. In the end, she found a willing mentor to teach her practical skills. Farmers also visited other farms in the region to share ideas and learn for new or established farmers. ACORN is a major resource for new entrants in the Atlantic Provinces. All farmers involved in this study cited the organization as a valuable resource for practical skill building.

Katherine summed up the education of new farmers eloquently, “It is a lifelong education. There is no map as to what it means to work in agriculture. You are always learning as the climate is changing and as business and market opportunities enter the fold.” Organic farming is often seen as ‘returning to an old way of life.’ While farmers may be using methods that are inspired by century old traditions, farming practices are modified to contemporary needs.

Entrepreneurship

Another common theme was the distinction between farming as a lifestyle and farming as a business. This distinction was more prominent among first career farmers, who often focused on practical skills before learning how to maintain a business. Katherine stressed the importance on entrepreneurship in her interview,

One key message that I say over and over again is that farming is entrepreneurship. Just because you are really great at growing vegetables doesn't mean that makes you a great farmer. That other fifty percent is business. You need to know how to market your products and how to keep good records. You need to know how to plan accordingly and be smart about the investments. Basically, it is important to think about your scale and how much you can do yourself or with your farming partner.”

Isabelle stressed that the success of a farm business relied on passion, education, and establishing a market. Aspiring and established neo-farmers need a sound business plan to make up for lack of experience.

First career farmers spoke about the challenges of growing their businesses. For Emma, this transition came early. She said, “I now think of farming as being a small business owner or being an entrepreneur and that business just happens to be farm based.” The majority of new farmers said they gained business skills through self-education. This includes workshops or online courses hosted by farmer organizations and speaking to other farmers. Emma gave an example of this in her interview, “Specifically I would ask farmers about marketing and business related aspects. Whereas in the beginning I think I was much more focused on gaining production skills.”

Second career farmers had a slightly different experience concerning farming as a business. They all had experience in the business world. Cara spoke about translating

her expertise in marketing from her previous career to farming. Marketing and branding were key aspects of business that were important to all farmers. As a graphic designer, Julia knew creating a brand for the farm was crucial to cultivating business. In the beginning, they developed a website, logo and social media accounts for the farm. Creating a solid brand establishes a farm's place in niche markets. Branding also allows small-scale farmers to be more competitive in relatively small communities. Five of the 6 farmers had stands at the weekend markets in Halifax or Dartmouth, NS.

James spoke of the precarious financial position of farmers, "It's very vulnerable position to be in and paradoxically very secure. Like the economy can go to hell in the hand basket and I still have something that people want...I feel I'm the most vulnerable and the most secure member of society." Neo-farmers have the a higher probability of pursuing organic or alternative farming enterprises. Horticulture is most common according to Isabelle, Katherine and this study's sample population. According to Isabelle, horticulture requires a lower capital investment, less farming land and provides a "return on an acre that is fairly good compared to some other commodities."

"Entrepreneurship" is the term often used by famers to describe their role in business. Georgia spoke about estimating what will be successful given consumer trends. She has a philosophy of trial and error. She has tried meat shares, CSAs and selling goods at the market and wholesale. It would seem that the most success comes from value-added products. Customers, particularly at the market, are seeking products that are health and environmentally conscious. Cara, who also comes from a business background, spoke about the need for value added products for a successful small-scale farm. Farmers add value by producing unique produce, practicing organic methods, gaining certifications or creating a dynamic brand for the farm.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of findings emphasizes the participation of local agricultural producer in food politics. Attention to food security and community building has allowed a space for neo-farmers to pursue alternative modes of agriculture. Farmer's motivations are grounded in the appreciation of health, hard work, and continuous learning. Four out of the six farmers explicitly mentioned their relationship with the environment in their interviews. The pursuit of healthy food is a reflection of environmentalism in its own way. The affects of the industrial food industry include the degradation of soil through monoculture and a heavy reliance on fossil fuels. There has been a growing interest in localization of food and organic food supply chains from academics, policymakers, community activists and government (Seyfang, n.d.)

In relation to farming, the renewed interested in local and organic food has increased the profitability of niche markets. Farmers spoke about the opportunity in niche markets. Having high quality, value-added goods allowed farms to make a higher profit. Consumer trends and the broader food movement determine value. Hamilton writes, "Our desire for better food, more information and choices, and preference for local action and personal involvement all reflect strong democratic tendencies and a growing awareness that as citizens, our actions can help shape a more sustainable food future" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 118). In this study, farmers' focus on the health associated with local food production reflects the cultural shift in food preferences.

In relation to radical ruralism, famers are actively reshaping the landscape through permaculture and organic farming methods. While James was the only farmer

to speak explicitly about finding a utopia, farmers alluded to farming as a way to enact positive change. Emma said, “We are always thinking of ways we can enhance the farm for the other species that live here and reduce the damage to the lifestyles of other species and their environment.” This holistic approach to farming belongs in the sphere of the contemporary back-to-the-land movement. In order to build further understanding of the radical rural in Nova Scotia, a larger population of farmers should be contacted. Even so, findings from this study suggest that there is a growing culture of rural radicalism in Nova Scotia. Farmers express their political engagement in a number of ways including agricultural methods and community building.

Farmer organizations have the potential to create a more welcoming environment for neo-farmers. Emma spoke about the desire for new farmers to join the political movement. There is the opportunity to learn from committee members while highlighting the needs of new farmers. “Being able to capture the knowledge and wisdom and skill set of older generations and be able to move forward with the work they have been doing is really valuable,” said Emma. In 2011, the National Young Farmer’s Coalition surveyed 1,000 young and beginner farmers in the United States to address their needs on a national scale. Access to capital was one of the main issues facing new farmers (Shute, 2011). In Canada, the need for a collaborative voice for new farmers led to the creation of the *New Farmer Survey* by the National Young Farmer Coalition. Findings will inform policy and education initiatives concerning aspiring and new farmers. Isabelle spoke about the need for better farmer support networks in Nova Scotia. For example, she suggested that self-employment benefits be granted to new farmers in the province. One of the main barriers to aspiring farmers is the cost of start-up and maintaining infrastructure.

Mzoughi's (2011) study on farmer adaptation of sustainable methods verifies that social and moral concerns are a factor in the agricultural process. Other motivating factors, such as protecting future generations and stewardship of the land, are present in the decisions made by farmers (Hetherington, 2005). Still, the majority of the research on neo-farmers places an emphasis the divide between conventional and organic farming. Additionally, there is certainly more research needed related to the social and individual aspects of the decision-making process that influence farmers. Mzoughi (2011) notes that the proportion of women is significantly higher in organic farming practices than conventional agriculture. In this study, 5 out of 6 farmers interviewed were female. Only one referred to the challenges of being a female in the agricultural industry. Georgia spoke about the farming community as a "boy's club." It took time for others in the community to view her as the primary farmer. Examining the motivations of female farmers would provide insight into this topic.

Another issue related to the viability of new farmers is apprenticeships. Findings show that apprenticeships are undoubtedly beneficial to new farmers. Neo-farmers have a lot to learn before they have the necessary skills to build a career in farming. This can create an imbalance, as there is the potential for farmers to exploit apprenticeships as sources of unpaid labour. In a webinar on apprenticeships, speakers outlined the difference in expectations between apprenticeships and paid labour (New Farmer's Initiative of FSC & FarmStart, 2015). Apprenticeships should be focused on learning the essential skills of farm labour and management. The experience of Alice is an excellent example of the ideal apprenticeship because she learned both the practical and business sides of agriculture. Since apprenticeships are often pay very little, it is important the

aspiring farmers learn the essential skills. While this study does not address the ethical issue of apprenticeships, it is an avenue for future research.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored the motivations and experiences of new farmers in Nova Scotia. Farmers were classified as neo-farmers, meaning they did not come from family agricultural backgrounds. There was a mix of farmers from urban and suburban landscapes. Informants were asked of a series of questions related to the lived experiences of farming in Nova Scotia, including motivations, barriers and challenges. This study also focused on the potential for farmers to express dissatisfaction with the dominant food system. Responses from six alternative farmers and two representatives from farmer organizations suggested that motivations are deeply connected to the environment and health. Farmers embraced the lifestyle of a small-scale farming including the hardships that come along with it.

First career and second career farmers expressed different ways of preparing for their own farm enterprises. First career farmers had the freedom to apprentice and gain practical skills. Conversely, second career farmers relied on more formal avenues to gain a practical education. This highlights the importance of organizations that aid new and aspiring farmers. More programs that help to alleviate the high start-up cost of farming and create positive learning environments may encourage more aspiring farmers to pursue farming as a career.

References

- Adler, E. S. & Clark, R. (2003). *How it's done: An invitation to social research*. California: Thomson Wadsworth Publishing.
- Alsos, G., Ljunggren, E. & Pettersen, L. (2003). Farm-based entrepreneurs: what triggers the start-up of new business activities. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development* 10(4), 435-443.
- Brown, D. (2011). *Back to the land: The enduring dream of self-sufficiency in modern America*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Crowther, G. (2013). *Eating Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Couihan, C. (Ed.) & Siniscalchi, V. (Ed.), (2014). *Food Activism*. Bloomsbury Academic Press.
- Gillespie, G.W., & Johnson, S.E. (2010). Success in farm start-ups in the Northeastern United States. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 1(1), 31-48.
- Gottlieb, R & Anupama J. (2010). *Food Justice*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Grow A Farmer Mentorship & Apprenticeship Program. (2014). *Program Overview*. Retrieved from <http://growafarmer.ca/about/>
- Halfacree, K. (2007). Back-to-the-land in the twenty-first century—making connections with rurality. *Journal of Economic and Social Geography* 98(1), 3-8.
doi:10.1111/j.1467-9663.2007.00371.x
- Halfacree, K. (2007). Trail by space for a 'radical rural': Introducing alternative localities representations and lives. *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, 125-141.
- Halfacree, K. & Rivera, M.J. (2011). Moving to the countryside...and staying: Lives beyond representations. *Sociologia Ruralis* 52(1), 92-108.
- Hamilton, ND. (2011). Moving toward food democracy: Better food, new farmers, and the myth of feeding the world. Retrieved from http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1951924
- Hansen, Y. (2011). Growing community: Community gardens as a local practice of food sovereignty. In Desmarais, A.A., Wiebe, N. & Wittman, H. (Ed.). *Food Sovereignty in Canada*. (pp. 151-167). Canada: Fernwood Publishing.
- Hetherington, K. (2005). *Cultivating utopia: Organic farmers in a conventional landscape*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

- Kvale S. & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. London: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- New Farmer's Initiative of FSC & FarmStart. (2015). Lessons Learned - Effective Internship and Apprenticeship Programs [Webinar].
- Mailfert, K. (2007). New farmers and networks: how beginning farmers build social connections in France. *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*. 98(1), 21–31. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9663.2007.00373.x
- Mzoughi, N. (2011). Farmers adoption of integrated crop protection and organic farming: Do moral and social concerns matter? *Ecological Economics*, 70(8), 1536–1545. doi:10.1016/j.ecolecon.2011.03.016
- Reimer, A., Thompson, A., & Prokopy, L. (2011). The multi-dimensional nature of environmental attitudes among farmers in Indiana: implications for conservation adoption. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 29(1), 29–40. doi:10.1007/s10460-011-9308-z
- Seyfang, G. (n.d.). New Initiatives for Sustainable Food: A Case Study of an Organic Producer Cooperative [Working Paper]. Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment. Retrieved from http://www.cserge.ac.uk/sites/default/files/edm_2004_11.pdf
- Shute, L. (2011). *Building a future with farmers*. Retrieved from http://www.youngfarmers.org/reports/Building_A_Future_With_Farmers.pdf
- Statistics Canada. (2014, Nov. 17). *The daily: Farm and farm operator data, 2011*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/141117/dq141117b-eng.htm>
- Smith, B. (2014, August 4). Don't let your children grow up to be farmers. *NY Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com
- Trauger, A. (2007). Un/re-constructing the agrarian dream: Going back-to-the-land with an organic marketing co-operative in south-central Pennsylvania, USA. *Royal Dutch Geography Society* 98(1), 9-20.
- Vik, J. & McElwee, G. (2011). Diversification and the entrepreneurial motivations of farmers in Norway. *Journal of Small Business Management* 49(3), 390-410.
- What is Food Sovereignty. (2014, June 2). Retrieved September 26, 2014, from <http://foodsecurecanada.org/who-we-are/what-food-sovereignty>
- Wilbur, A. (2013). Growing a radical ruralism: Back-to-the-land as practice and ideal. *Geography Compass*, 7(2), 149–160. doi:10.1111/gec3.12023

