Agricultural Self-Concept in Contemporary Society

Aaron Cochrane
Pacific University

Recommended Citation
https://commons.pacificu.edu/cassoc/20

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Sciences Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.
Agricultural Self-Concept in Contemporary Society

Abstract
This research explores what it means to be a farmer in today’s world. Agriculture has fed the majority of people throughout history and, by continually becoming more labor-efficient, has provided the ability for an ever-increasing diversification and specialization of labor in nonagricultural industries. Even as societies have become increasingly complex, the role of agriculture as necessary for sustenance has not changed. Farmers in developed countries today have a unique experience as occupying a dual role as both fundamental and vestigial in relation to the rest of their society. This study explores the experiences and identity of wheat farmers in southeastern Washington through autoethnographic immersion as well as interviews done over a two-month period in the summer of 2012. Specifically, life histories and current views on agriculture and society are used to develop an idea of how self-concept is constructed based on various contradictory roles that farmers fill in both micro- and macrosocietal levels. This study joins a host of multidisciplinary rural-studies research that has informed our perspective on agriculture and refines our idea of the farming experience, but it points to a need for more research on the differences, similarities and interactions between rural and urban culture in developed nations.

Document Type
Capstone Project

Degree Name
Bachelor of Arts

Department
Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work and Public Health

Subject Categories
Anthropology

Comments
Note: Revised version with minor grammatical corrections uploaded 5.28.2014.
# Table of Contents

Abstract 3

Introduction 5

Methodology 7
  Introduction 7
  Theoretical Basis 7
  Population 11
  Role of the Researcher 14
  Data Collection 15
  Data Analysis 17
  Limits and Methods of Verification 17

Literature Review 21
  Introduction 21
  Interdisciplinary Findings 21
  Theoretical Model 24
  Anthropology of Agriculture 26
  Deficiencies in the Literature 28

Findings 31
  Introduction 31
  Contradiction I. Ancient vs Modernized 31
  Contradiction II. Peripheral vs Central 36
  Contradiction III. Vestigial vs Necessary 39
  Contradiction IV. Powerless vs Fundamental 42

Conclusion 51

Appendix I. Consent Script 53

Appendix II. Sample Interview Question 54

Appendix III. Participant Profiles 55

Appendix IV. Working Definitions 56

Acknowledgements 59
Agricultural Self-Concept in Contemporary Society

By

Aaron Cochrane

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology

May 2013

Pacific University
Forest Grove, OR
Abstract

This research explores what it means to be a farmer in today’s world. Agriculture has fed the majority of people throughout history and, by continually becoming more labor-efficient, has provided the ability for an ever-increasing diversification and specialization of labor in non-agricultural industries. Even as societies have become increasingly complex, the role of agriculture as necessary for sustenance has not changed. Farmers in developed countries today have the unique experience of occupying a dual role as both fundamental and vestigial in relation to the rest of their society. This study explores the experiences and identity of wheat farmers in southeastern Washington through autoethnographic immersion as well as interviews done over a two-month period in the summer of 2012. Specifically, life histories and current views on agriculture and society are used to develop an idea of how self-concept is constructed based on various contradictory roles that farmers fill in both micro- and macro-societal levels. This study joins a host of multidisciplinary rural-studies research that has informed our perspective on agriculture and refines our idea of the farming experience, but it points to a need for more research on the differences, similarities and interactions between rural and urban culture in developed nations.
Introduction

Western society has experienced radical changes in structure and culture in its transformation from agrarian to post-industrial bases. These changes have drastically altered the roles and experiences of farmers, and the identity of what it means to be a farmer has been forced to adapt to shifting social and economic landscapes. The shifts have largely been fueled by the productivity- and progress-oriented ethos of the capitalist worldview that has colonized nearly every corner of the world. Just as they have been driven by societal opinions and pressures, these fundamental shifts have continued to reinforce the very culture and ethos which facilitated and caused them\(^1\). In this environment of cultural-structural change and an ethos of progress, those industries, such as agriculture, which survive through societal transformation can easily be construed as *vestigial* structures that used to be, but no longer are, relevant and important to society. Even as they try to reinvent themselves or to adapt to a new cultural environment, their similarity in appearance and function to traditional industries indelibly mark them as antiquated and fossilized remnants of the past.

This vestigial conceptualization of industries that have survived the shift to the post-industrial era is especially relevant in the field of agriculture. Agriculture is the world’s oldest industry, and the presence of agriculture facilitated the specialization of labor on which Western history lies\(^2\). It is also the most necessary; nearly the entire human species relies on it for sustenance. It has survived into the current day and age out of necessity for the survival of the species, but because of its antiquity and station at the bottom of the food chain, it is out of place in a *hyperspecialized* and *post-industrial* society. This exclusion is exacerbated by agriculture's necessarily isolated physical location in comparison to cultural centers.


The characterization of agriculture as antiquated and as vestigial in contemporary society combines with and complements other ways in which farmers are marginalized. These include the physical marginalization of agriculture on the periphery of society as well as the farmers’ lack of agency. In this ethnography I seek to explore the personal and experiential side of these topics and to see if, and how, farmers themselves live their societal marginalization. What I find is that each aspect of this marginalization is accompanied by a contradictory concept that is also internalized into the farmers’ identities, and it is through this series of dialectical oppositions that the self-concept of a contemporary farmer is constructed.

This study consisted of a series of interviews and first-hand experiences with 6 owner-operator dryland wheat farmers in southeastern Washington State, USA. I grew up in this community and therefore am familiar with the way of life it entails as well as the worldview that accompanies it. Here I investigate this worldview with great depth, however, and seek through conducting oral history interviews to explore issues such as self-concept, ingroup-outgroup relations, and historical changes within the group.

This research explores the identity politics of owner-operator farmers and their relationships with mainstream, globalized, post-industrial society. The implications run deeper than just a few disparate farmers, however; I hope to add to the anthropological literature a greater understanding of how marginal sectors of society interact with mainstream society culturally, economically, and politically, in order to create individuals’ identities. In this way I hope to contribute new knowledge regarding how one's identity is enacted, perceived, and shaped by relations within one's own subculture as well as with the dominant culture.
Methodology

Introduction

Employing a qualitative research method with a phenomenological grounding allows data to be gathered and knowledge developed inductively and in a participant-centered manner. This is the best type of research to undertake in an investigation of agricultural identity, because it allows conclusions to be drawn from the actual experiences of farmers and facilitates deep concepts like identity to be addressed in participants’ own words and opinions. This section will discuss the theoretical basis, role of the researcher, data collection procedures and data analysis procedures of the research methodology as well as identifying the limits and methods of verifying this study’s conclusions.

Theoretical Basis

Within a multidisciplinary investigation of a topic such as self-concept an anthropological and ethnographic lens is critical for its pursuit of depth rather than breadth of knowledge. This means that anthropology seeks to find meaning and significance through idiographic and qualitative investigations of people and their interactions. It pursues a greater knowledge of humankind by favoring specificities and anecdotes as being more indicative of human reality than consensuses. Ultimately, anthropology seeks a better understanding of human reality by eschewing generalizations and privileging the lived experience of individuals.

This regard for the lived experience of people gives lie to the phenomenological undergirding of anthropology. This refers to the basic principle that the pursuit of anthropological knowledge exists within, is a function of, and has as its goal the lived experience of individuals. The recognition of these three aspects of intersubjectivity is the first step to adopting an anthropological perspective. The next step is that of recognizing cultural relativism.

The conclusion of the threefold recognition of phenomenological intersubjectivity is that,
in order to proceed with an anthropological study, the first two must be accounted for and the
effects of them mitigated. In order to gain a truer understanding of another’s lived experience the
effects of the researcher’s own background must be reduced as much as possible and openly
identified where relevant. At the same time, the nature of intersubjective research is that the
researcher will inevitably have some impact on the findings. The mitigation of this impact rests
on the most visible and well-known tenet of anthropology – cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism in research is, on the surface, simply an intentional refusal to judge
the people being researched based on the values and norms of the culture of the researcher. This
is an extremely important perspective (or lack-of-perspective) to take in anthropological
research. The application of it is much more difficult than it initially may seem, however.
Cultural relativism necessitates an active reflection on the researcher’s culture in order to
acknowledge and mitigate its effects on the research, which is extremely difficult for many
people to enact. The product of the research will be devalued by relativism, as well, because the
recognition of the subjective researcher casts doubt on any conclusions. This double-sided
devolution may lead to despair but should also be a motivation for greater rigor as well as
transparency in anthropological research and publications.

Ethnography, the hallmark of anthropology, is an inductive research methodology that
embraces cultural relativism and privileges depth over breadth. This methodology seeks to break
down physical and social barriers so that the researcher can enter the lived experience of the
population. In this way it embodies and reinforces both cultural relativism and phenomenology.
By combining participation and observation it puts the researcher in the lives of the researched
and blurs the distinction between the two; without this distinction the research becomes
empirical (in that it is based in the researcher’s experience) and the influences of the researcher's
culture on the research are reduced.
As ethnographic researchers enter the lived experience of the people they work with, they also inevitably carry academic and theoretical assumptions just as they carry their own cultural biases and limitations. These assumptions are recognized and reflected upon in order to establish the research as inductive as well as minimize the effects of preconceived notions or frameworks that could be imposed upon the community being researched. In this way, ethnographic inductivity is crucial because the very logical paradigms and social theories that anthropologists utilize to understand their worlds and fieldwork are themselves cultural constructs. The inductive formation of knowledge in this sense is nearly synonymous with a phenomenological approach in that both seek to develop knowledge from lived experiences.

The theoretical basis of my analysis is multi-faceted. Anthropological analysis of ethnographic research seeks to explain the way in which the world is experienced by a people through various manners of attending to reality. This analysis approaches several sources: the verbally recorded data, the subjective past experiences of myself as the researcher, and the subtle unquantifiable trends and impressions that the participants and the research process have conveyed. It views these sources in a diachronic light and examines change over time, from a synchronic perspective and investigates the current moment as it is being lived, through a structural lens that examines the reciprocal formation of actions and possibilities, and as situated in an established field of academic research and knowledge. These manners of attending to reality are not artificially divided and compartmentalized, but rather integrated into a holistic analysis of the research.

The diachronic and historical perspective may be the most familiar to those outside the social sciences. It seeks to place the research and the world of the participants within a historical context. More than this, however, its goal is to identify the historical events, physical or

---

geographic features, beliefs, and trends that have interacted to reproduce a certain distinctive form of social reality. Narotsky and Smith explain this avenue of investigation as examining “the ‘concrete abstractions’ that condition the possibilities of social reproduction.” By focusing on the historical and physical realities we can shed light on the very conditions which allow a given social reality and identity to take hold. This focus on both historical change and reproduction was a primary goal in both my research and my analysis thereof; by inquiring as to what had changed and what has endured over time, I was able to gain a greater knowledge of the diachronic social reality.

The synchronic lens, with its goal of conveying a clear and complete picture of a certain moment, is the second manner of approaching the research. This is the hallmark of classical anthropology and serves to elucidate the lived experience of individuals. It does not attempt to generalize, but rather delves into the placement, experiences, meanings, and opinions of a people as they are living their lives in a single moment in time. Narotsky and Smith explain this as an “interpretive sensibility”, or “structures of feeling that [gives] rise to a specific meaning.” I used this type of synchronic mindset as the heart of my analysis in order to keep the research truly participant-centered because ethnographic research is, at its heart, wholly concerned with lived experience.

Moving in a slightly more theoretical direction, a type of structural model is extremely useful in light of both synchronic and diachronic analyses. I am making no attempt at a thorough structural analysis of agency, but I do want to call attention to many points of a farmer’s life in which practices and structural forms are reciprocally constructed. Narotsky and Smith propose to

---

4 Ibid, 5. Narotzky and Smith continue on to explain this idea as “the conditions of material production (machines, technologies, etc.)” as well as “concrete, but nonetheless obscured, abstractions”

5 Ibid., 5.
investigate “the way practices become part of the albeit malleable frame that organizes agency,” and through this line of inquiry I am able to conceptualize how farmers’ actions may be evidence of their agency but could also be evidence of their lack thereof. From this agentic perspective many situations in which farmers find themselves are simply the results of their own or outsiders’ actions, and the situations then only permit certain actions, which then create the next formative situations. This reciprocal basis of social reality is the reason for my emphasis on influences and contradictions. Contradictions may be active or passive, overt or subtle, but uncovering them indicates the dialectical oppositions and structural forms that define a lived reality.

Lastly, any analysis is inevitably both situated in and derived from, to a degree, the body of academic literature in which it belongs. To this end I have attempted to acquaint myself to the main works in agricultural and rural anthropology that would be relevant to my research as well as with other pertinent agricultural and social science works. I then implement the perspectives and ideas from these works into my analysis of farmers in the Pacific Northwest.

**Population**

The participants in this study were 6 owner-operator dryland wheat farmers in southeastern Washington. A vast region of the state of Washington consists of dryland wheat production; there are extensive regions of irrigated land surrounding the state’s major rivers, but the majority of the arable land in the eastern portion of the state (as well as eastern Oregon and much of Idaho) is dedicated to the production of non-irrigated wheat.

It is necessary to understand a bit about the lifestyle of farmers when discussing them as a population. Farming is, and always has been, a type of symbiosis with the earth. Farmers have

---

6 Ibid, 5.
traditionally been called stewards of the land, yet are also completely dependent upon the very land they are caretakers of. This intimate involvement with the natural world causes the job of the farmer to change from day to day as much as the weather does. Each season brings with it a new set of tasks to complete and a new outlook on life; there are times when rain is desired and times when dryness is necessary, there are seasons for planting and seasons for weeding and seasons for harvesting. To summarize the daily life of a southeastern Washington dryland wheat farmer is impossible in a short space because of this grand variation in perspectives and jobs within the vocation. Still, to provide an image with which to understand the lifestyle, I will explain the work and outlook present in the time period of early June, when I conducted my interviews.

June, in the particular region I conducted my research, corresponds loosely to the time of year dedicated to preparing for the wheat harvest. Wheat farmers in this region survive in an arid environment in which rain is usually desired, and the single biggest factor deciding the success or failure of a year’s crop is the amount of precipitation. During this time of year rain generally is not wanted, however, because the wheat crop is fully grown and must dry out before being harvested. This period of dryness should last until the crop is fully harvested (often the middle to end of August), after which rain is desired once again for the next growing season.

In the interest of the moisture and nutrient content of the soil, it is most economically advantageous to farm in a biennial fallow rotation system. This means that any given field is only planted with a crop every other year. The ground during its cropless year is called summer fallow and it lies dormant in order to replenish the resources that each crop takes from it. The primary job of farmers in relation to this ground is to keep it free of weeds, which extract the very nutrients and moisture necessary to crops.

One of the main tasks also specific to June is to ensure that the summer fallow has no
weeds so that they will not be an issue during the harvest season. This can be a massive task, since at any given time half of a farmer’s land is in summer fallow. This task of weeding can be accomplished through various methods, but two predominate: spraying herbicides and rodweeding (which consists of dragging a metal rod underneath the ground in order to uproot any plants).

The other primary field operation during this time is that of fertilizing. Nitrogen-based fertilizer is applied to the ground using specialized machinery that is often rented from companies specializing in agricultural technology and equipment. Fertilizing generally has to be done to all summer fallow ground in addition to weeding so that, when the time comes to plant the next year’s crop, sufficient nitrogen will have been absorbed into the soil to be available to that crop.

During times of intensive field operations farmers generally spend between 9-13 hours, 5-6 days a week, driving tractors pulling implements specific to the task at hand. The majority of the work is done by the owners of the property but quite often there are also employees contributing to the work. The employment dynamic of this population is complex and important. For the purposes of this explanation it is simply important to note that during these times of field operations, the majority of the farm workers (owners or not) work long solitary hours driving tractors.

The other primary tasks of this region’s farmers in June is that of preparing harvest equipment. The coming harvest, which begins in early to middle July and lasts between 2 weeks and 2 months, is a very intensive time of work and is the only time of year in which the farmers reap the product of their toil (and consequently receive a paycheck). As such, it is of the utmost importance.

---

8 The prevalence of owner-operators in this area may or may not be anomalous in the wider scale of agriculture in the USA, but it is critical to the identity of this region.
importance and an extensive period of time leading up to it is devoted to ensuring that all of the harvesting machines (called combines), trucks to haul wheat, grain silos, and even private field roads are prepared for the upcoming harvest season. These preparations are relatively relaxed in comparison to the field operations, but they are still time-critical and must be completed in time to begin harvest when the crop is mature.

This is the work environment in which I found my participants. It is one of long hours and a multitude of varying tasks, yet hope and optimism in light of the imminent harvest season. I sought to interview a variety of different individuals in the region whom were experiencing similar workloads and had both shared and differing histories and perspectives on farming, agriculture in general, and the relationships they as farmers have with the world at large.

I chose the particular farmers who were to become my ethnographic informants through snowball sampling – I talked about my research with individuals in the community whom I know, and they helped me contact my participants. I sought to interview participants who would be willing to have an open conversation about many social and agricultural topics as well as having a diverse array of opinions. I succeeded in developing a diverse participant set, to a degree; my participants included three from the older generation (60+) and three from the younger generation (35-60), 5 men and 1 woman, 5 owners and 1 employee, and 4 individuals originally from the region along with 2 from elsewhere.

Role of the Researcher

My research is a form of participant observation ethnography. I chose my own culture and heritage, that of an owner-operator farmer in southeastern Washington, as the subject of my research. This allowed me to draw upon my own experiences living in an agricultural community in contemporary Western society. At the same time I was conducting my research I was working on a farm and engaging every single day with the issues and topics that American farmers face.
This constant engagement with the issues personally and socially is what prompted me to explore the topic of this research.

I grew up on a dryland wheat farm in southeastern Washington and have been interested in the topics of agricultural identity and culture for quite a while now. I left the region to attend college, but when the opportunity arose to conduct original research I chose to direct my studies at my own history and mystery: That of dryland wheat farmers as well as contemporary agriculture in general. Returning from college to the region in which I had spent the majority of my childhood and adolescence allowed me to have the perspectives of both an insider and outsider; I could understand and empathize with the vast majority of my participants’ stories while maintaining the relatively detached and reflective anthropological perspective that I had cultivated in college.

**Data Collection**

Anthropological ethnography is generally a process of identifying a community to be studied, entering the community and building rapport, collecting data while living as a community member, and writing an ethnographic account and analysis for publication after exiting the community. The most delicate and critical components of this system are developing rapport and living as a community member, as these are the experiences that facilitate ethnographic research as well as providing empirical knowledge of a community. Unfortunately, a full ethnographic research project is far out of the scope of most undergraduate research programs. This is why my research consists of a modified ethnographic methodology that incorporates autoethnography, which allows me to largely circumvent the processes of rapport-building and growing accustomed to life in the community.

To direct my investigations into agricultural lived histories and self-concept, I conducted
and audio-recorded open-ended interviews to conduct with individuals I would meet. These open-ended interviews provided me with concrete data on the topics that have been relevant to me in my farming past as well as those most impactful to my participants, and my subsequent comparison of my own experiences, information from the current literature, and the interview data gave me rich and multifaceted perspectives on the contemporary agricultural experience.

The questions I asked concerned the participants' life histories, specifically regarding their families’ lives and experiences within agriculture. They included enquiries as to the individuals' family histories, views on economics, and ideas about how farming fits into American society today. Following the anthropological tradition, I sought depth rather than breadth within this case study; I preferred having meaningful and in-depth conversational interviews with only a handful of individuals over conducting a large number of structured and surface-level interviews with a wide variety of people. This type of informal oral history interview is a cornerstone of anthropological research, particularly in those situations wherein the researcher has limited time and resources available.

During the oral history interviews I had a few guiding questions with which to start the conversation. These questions arose out of prior anthropological research I conducted in a farming community in the US Pacific Northwest, questions I noticed or inferred from the anthropological and agricultural literature, and my own experiences in the community. I then asked follow-up questions depending on the individuals’ answers to the initial questions. This allowed me to dig deeper and develop a clearer picture of the farmers’ self-concept. My emphasis in the interviews was directing conversation toward the topic of influences; I wanted to know how factors within and outside agriculture had affected the individuals throughout their

---

9 Prior to the interview, each individual signed a consent form. See Appendix I
10 See Appendix II
lives, as well as how they anticipated these factors might influence their future. This focus on influence and oral history gave lie to many of the components of history, identity and self-concept by highlighting key life goals and insecurities as well as indicating their senses of personal and community agency.

**Data Analysis**

I attempt to analyze my research within the complex, multifaceted paradigm explained above. The data that I collected was in the form of recorded audio from each interview. This I supplemented with written notes that I took regarding the non-verbal impressions that I had perceived while conducting the interviews. I then saved all the audio and notes to a secure website that only I would be able to access.

The other source of information that I analyze is my subjective experience. As a native southeastern Washington wheat farmer, I have had extensive and varying subjective experiences from which to draw conclusions. I use this experience as well as my data and attempt to view my own life, actions and beliefs through the same varying kinds of attention to reality.

**Limits and Methods of Verification**

Anthropological and ethnographic research is inherently fraught with limitations, which must be recognized in order to understand and apply it. As I stated above, one of the more obvious limitations is that of the central and influential role that the researcher has in ethnography. The research and the analysis are subjective, and all ethnography should be understood knowing that the researcher’s biases, though mitigated to an extent through self-reflection, training and a perspective of cultural relativism, still will be present within their work.

Another limitation that is immediately evident is that of a lack of generalizability. Ethnography is research that makes little attempt at generalizability in favor of deep understanding of lived experiences, and this must be kept in mind in order that incorrect wide-
ranging assumptions must not be made. Many types of research seek to be generalizable through random sampling, experimental controls, statistically significant samples, etc. Ethnography is another type of research entirely and cannot be viewed from the same perspective as research that seeks generalizability. Rather, ethnography should be used as a method for understanding our world and social reality. It should be a starting point from which we can see and live the human experience and then move into more formalized inquiries with a deeper critical awareness of the current and historical reality. It should also be the ending point and the culmination of these generalizable inquiries in order that their quantified results may have a human face.

In this regard, the limits of ethnography are inherently tied in with the methods for its verification. In order to situate it within a historical context and within the literature, as I mentioned above, it must be conducted and analyzed from a perspective that is informed by many types of literature. Generalizable research should both confirm, to a degree, and be reaffirmed by the experiential ethnographic research.

In this research I attempt to verify and inform my research to the greatest extent possible through research into the current literature. I carried the perspectives I gained from this literature into my research and my perspectives on the literature were altered subtly throughout my research and analysis. Ethnography cannot be verified through repetition or increasing sample size or other techniques familiar to other methods of research; still, by reading anthropological, geographical, historical, demographic, and other types of research, I ensured that my ethnographic project was historically and academically situated and fit reasonably into the literature. The primary method for verification in ethnography is the very multi-faceted manner of attending to reality that I explained above – by attempting to approach the research project

---

from a wide variety of perspectives and methods we can construct an idea of lived experiences that are as rich and accurate as possible.
Literature Review

Introduction

In reviewing the literature relevant to an ethnographic study of contemporary agricultural communities a thorough understanding should be developed in three areas: An interdisciplinary foundation, a theoretical framework, and data from the field of agricultural anthropology. A synthesis of these sources provides a thorough working knowledge of the topic while demonstrating areas of research in which the literature is lacking.

Interdisciplinary Findings

Information from various disciplines of social science can be drawn upon in order to develop a broad understanding of the landscape of rural life and communities. Beginning from the perspective of economics, contemporary agricultural communities can be conceptualized as inextricable parts of larger economic systems\(^\text{13}\). In these systems they are inevitably hierarchically situated below the urban centers with which they interact. The urban centers act as sources as well as destinations for products, which tie the regions together across distances large and small. The notion of rural society as being linked to, dependent on, but only minimally influential on urban society is a crucial point to recognize both economically and anthropologically.

Hierarchically defined spatial relations are promoted and implemented in geography to demonstrate the networks and power relationships within production and agricultural-commodity chains\(^\text{14}\). These power relationships tend to marginalize agriculture through its lower position in the spatial and economic hierarchy. Still, agriculture remains vital to rural and non-urban societal


systems through its spatial, economic and social interactions\textsuperscript{15}. According to the geographical approach agricultural systems must be studied as foundational to rural society both internally and in its relations to external factors. The most salient example of this is that, as the number of individuals involved agriculture has continued to decrease, rural areas have declined both economically and in population.

The history of agriculture itself is extensive, and any study of agriculture should be based in an understanding of the historical roots that a given contemporary system has.\textsuperscript{16} An understanding of global political-economic and agricultural history is also critical to the formation of an accurate portrait of agricultural communities. The current state of individuals and communities has been shaped by political policies and economic trends for hundreds of years. In the past century, the influences of neoliberal capitalism, post-industrialism, and globalization in particular are being felt in every corner of the world\textsuperscript{17}. This has included benefits to farmers in land-resource rich countries such as the United States, who have greatly benefited at the expense of high-population-density and land-poor countries such as Japan and various European nations. Globalization has had its disasters as well; problems ranging from immigration issues to the displacement of farmers unable to compete on a global market have been exacerbated by global neoliberal capitalism. The economic makeup itself of the USA tends to be related to the trends in agricultural identity that are the topic of this study; as agriculture has continually become less important economically in relation to other industries it has been pushed towards the margins of our economic system, which corresponds to the social marginalization of farmers themselves.


On a much more personal level, farmers can be viewed through a psychological lens. Vocational psychology provides a framework for understanding relationships between occupation and self, and can further one's understanding of motivations for career choices as well as perceived efficacy within a career\textsuperscript{18}. These are important concepts to draw upon when developing an idea of the shared experience of various individuals all involved in a single occupation and lifestyle, namely farming. Self-efficacy is an especially important construct to examine because it is closely correlated to behaviors and lifestyle choices. Farmers' self-efficacy is paramount because growing up in a farming environment may cause them to perceive themselves as being efficacious and successful only in agriculture because they lack other occupational experience. Occupational self-concept can often be an internalization of an individual's vocation through a process of identity integration\textsuperscript{19}. Farmers may experience this integration much more thoroughly than most professions if, as is traditional, they experience agriculture during their formative childhood and adolescent years.

A closer look at the identities that integration of personal identity and agricultural occupation causes individuals to internalize can be brought to light by studying the academic discourses surrounding agriculture. These discourses of identity include the nature of defining and placing a family farm in contemporary society, the occurrence of occupational masculinization within agriculture, and contemporary trends of rural detraditionalization; each of these are important topics to address within this study\textsuperscript{20}.

Another psychological perspective that is interesting and applicable to an analysis of contemporary rural society is one of "psychoanthropology." This psychoanalytical method sheds

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
light on social phenomena such as symbols, rituals, ethnicities, genders, and group-fantasies. Although psychoanalytical conclusions should generally be taken into consideration carefully, these ideas still are relevant and contribute to an understanding of rural America. Psychoanthropology is especially critical important in explaining how individuals' experiences lead to their actions, which lead to collective beliefs and rituals, which are inextricably woven into the fabric of the very culture which provides individuals with experiences\textsuperscript{21}.

Lastly, non-academic media can provide insightful information regarding current trends and issues in agriculture. Informational publications from the USDA, agricultural associations, and even newspapers shed light on the topics that are most visible to the public; these include demographic information,\textsuperscript{22} local industry facts,\textsuperscript{23} and market interactions.\textsuperscript{24} I intentionally kept popular media references to a minimum in this thesis; had I taken every opportunity to utilize magazines, web sites, commercials and newspapers, the media-agriculture relationship would have overwhelmed this thesis.

**Theoretical model**

A theoretical model that is both highly applicable and not overly constraining can be difficult to outline, and various social theories are competing for prominence within rural studies. Assessments of community capacity, which measure a community's ability to improve its well-being, may focus on a group's social capital and collective efficacy.\textsuperscript{25} This is an excellent model for understanding the development and perpetuation of rural communities' assets and actions, but does not align well with this study's goals of investigating agricultural self-concept. This does,

however, outline measurements of social capital availability (such as proximity to health care
and number of nearby churches) which are very useful in understanding the nuances of a
subjective agricultural experience and the resulting identity formation.

With regard to theories of agricultural production, the sociological and economic
emphases on productivism and post-productivism are highly contested. A central argument of
post-productivism is that agricultural systems in post-industrial societies are shifting away from
an emphasis on mere productivity in favor of goals such as counter-urbanization, cooperation
with NGOs, political activism, on-farm diversification, and value-added or organic farming. Post-productivism can be a useful way of conceptualizing a current macro-level shift in
agricultural systems, but investigating the interplay between this shift and social-psychological
notions of farmers' agency indicates that individuals still remain mostly productivity-driven even
as the industry indicates widespread post-productivism. The most valuable contribution of post-
productivist theory is a diversification in the way social scientists study agriculture. Researching
alternative food systems provides other perspectives on agriculture besides simple commodity
chains; food quality and localization are non-traditional factors in modern agriculture, and a
model emphasizing food networks indicates that networks themselves and the relations they
embody may be the most relevant aspect of agriculture. Agricultural post-productivism does
have vehement detractors, however, and is criticized for being too strictly dualistic when a more

---


heterogenous and multifunctional model of agriculture should be promoted.\textsuperscript{29}

I found one item in the ethnographic literature bridging the gap between complex contemporary theory and first-person fieldwork\textsuperscript{30}. It outlines a theoretical model that is pertinent, open-ended and attentive to the possibilities and nuances of this type of study. This model examines the interactions between regional, informal and small-scale economies with large-scale globalized ones and it gives particular attention to the ways in which these interactions are experienced and lived by individuals within the regional economy. In particular it explores the ways in which regions and industries have retained their traditions and their agency without embracing isolationism, but rather by blending globalization with regionalism. The model then takes an excellent reflective and meta-analytical turn and recognizes how social studies and theories influence policy as well as public opinion, with the changing trends in theories and analyses affecting the very objects of analysis. It moves then into a discussion of the very processes of social reproduction and perpetuation and continues on to outline a multifaceted research perspective to use in an ethnographic study. This ethnography's theoretical model is a perfect starting point for my research because of its attention to the interactions between rural individuals and globalization as well as its concern for the relationship between academia and society. Still, as this project progresses, remaining epistemologically relational and theoretically pluralistic will be valuable in providing the greatest insight on agriculture by dispelling assumptions and by casting rurality as a relational concept with multi-faceted manifestations. \textsuperscript{31}

**Anthropology of Agriculture**

An understanding of the traditional social landscape of agriculture, though not necessarily


a perfect basis for making assumptions about contemporary agriculture, is still relevant in that it provides a context in which to understand life histories and changing cultures. In particular, having knowledge about the history, interactions and perpetuation of peasantry is important for gaining a perspective on agriculture today\textsuperscript{32}. Using this historical context along with the earlier mentioned theories of regional/global interactions, contemporary farmers may be understood as a type of neo-peasantry that has kept certain aspects of traditional peasantry while integrating other, more modern, methods into their lifestyles.

Transitioning between antiquated and modern agricultural practices and lifestyles can be extremely difficult, and is often exacerbated by both political and economic pressures on farmers.\textsuperscript{33} These transitions are especially challenging within farming families themselves, and the very definitions of what families or family farms constitute can shake the social foundations of families, communities and entire regions. Inevitably new social norms and expectations are developed in the wake of externally imposed changes, but farmers' sense of agency may be indelibly scarred. This lack of agency and sense of doubt often peaks in one of the most critical and fragile points in a farm's existence: the succession of ownership and farming between generations.\textsuperscript{34} Intergenerational succession, because of its uncertainty and the detrimental effects of unsuccessful transitions, is a major factor in shaping the culture and future of farming and is linked with topics as varied as the rising average age of farmers and the increasing diversity and adaptability of family farms.

In the literature concerning the region where I will be doing the majority of my research, a broad knowledge base on the migration of people is a solid foundation for the formation of


\textsuperscript{34} Cochrane, A. K. (2012) \textit{Will the circle be unbroken: The inescapable issue of intergenerational succession in American agriculture}. Unpublished manuscript, Pacific University
individuals' self-concepts within the region. There has been a general trend towards migration into rural areas in Washington\(^\text{35}\). This study notes that migration to rural areas has generally been occurring within low-income populations and has been associated with marked social change in the areas, which may be important factor to consider when considering the self-concepts of farmers who most likely were present before the new population and who may have strong opinions about the newcomers.

In the ethnographic literature, there is one anthropological study that delves specifically into the very type of community that I want to study. This ethnography looks into the community structure and relations of a small wheat-farming town in eastern Washington\(^\text{36}\). Although this book focuses on town/community cohesion and persistence through time, which is very different than the emphases that I have, it still provides a solid context and methodology for investigating agriculture in Washington by explaining both successful ethnographic methods as well as the community’s reactions to anthropologists.

**Deficiencies in the Literature**

Literature applicable to a study of contemporary agricultural self-concept can be drawn from a wide variety of sources and provides a detailed and challenging portrait of the present-day farmer. Even more quantitative detail could be implemented by using extensive historical economics and demographics, but this brings the topic farther away from phenomenological self-concept. The literature lacks the depth and subtlety that an intimate life-history study of the human side of farmers’ self-concept produces. Ethnography can facilitate this subtle knowledge-gathering process. This study serves to fill in the lesser-known, deeper, human side of agricultural self-concept through its ethnographic investigation of the lived histories of American


farmers.
Findings

Introduction

Throughout the processes of living with and interviewing farmers countless topics of interest to the anthropology of agriculture arose, but I have sifted through these to highlight what I feel are those themes most important to the construction of farmer self-concept. In particular, I directed my investigation at the dialectical oppositions which define farmers’ lived realities. These oppositions are grouped into four categories of contradictions, which I will deal with in turn. The first contradiction is that of agriculture as antiquated yet modernized, the second explains agriculture as peripheral yet central, the third is of agriculture as vestigial yet necessary, and the fourth casts agriculture as powerless yet fundamental. By examining the ways farmers have described these contradictions to me, we can shed light on the interactions between the opposing factors and gain an understanding of the substrate on which agricultural self-concept is constructed.

Contradiction I. Ancient vs Modernized

One of the most immediately evident contradictions in farmers’ lives is that of fulfilling an ancient societal role in a modern way. Agriculture has been a constant in societal development for thousands of years and undergirds the division and specialization of labor that is the hallmark of all societies not considered hunter-gatherers. In this way it can be seen as the oldest of industries in that it is the very definition of industry; it is the original specialization of labor that gave rise to every other specialization of labor, or industry. From microprocessor manufacturing to environmental law, every socioeconomic niche that exists in our contemporary world.

---

ultimately relies on agriculture as the original niche that has both generated and sustained specialization.

Another aspect of agriculture that is necessarily antiquated is that of products. Agriculture produces a wide variety of products, but the most essential of these are quite similar to the products produced 100, 1,000 or 5,000 years ago. The crop grown by farmers in the region where I conducted my research is wheat, one of the world’s 3 major staple crops, which has been cultivated for around 9,500 years.

Because the processes and products of agricultural work are both ancient, by extension the individuals involved are seen as filling an antiquated role in society as well. The essential role of farmers consists of the same functions, providing sustenance and facilitating labor specialization, that farmers have always done. We live in a society in which transportation, art, housing, and interpersonal relations have all been transformed drastically over the past couple thousand years. The roles of scientists, teachers, lawyers, and vendors are different than they were a thousand years ago, which was in turn very different from their roles a thousand years before that. This is not to say that the experience of farming is the same as it was in the past, but that the essential roles that farming fills has changed less than the majority of professions. I will discuss this further in the section on the vestigial nature of agriculture as well; the simple fact of the eminent antiquity of agriculture as an occupation is what contributes to this first contradiction.

Agriculture, then, fills a societal role that is ancient in nature. This antiquity of both agriculture and the profession of farming contrasts sharply with the actual process of farming in the contemporary USA. Agriculture, as with most industries that have existed for a long period of time, has undergone many changes in processes and has experienced systemic technological

---

38 Ibid. 79
advancements. From field work, such as precision planting, to crop care, such as advanced pesticide use, to transportation, such as man-made lock-and-waterway systems, agriculture utilizes methods that are quite advanced and are radically different from those of decades past.\textsuperscript{39} In the words of Tom, “you take an average farmer today, compare us to back in the 30’s, there’s no way that today we could have a dust bowl, because our farming practices have changed... overall, farmers have become more efficient, and we have become friendlier to the environment.”

The farmers I interviewed seemed to take the antiquated/modernized contradiction as a given fact of farming. The value of history was paramount in our discussions of the farming experience, and inevitably the first thing we talked about was the family’s history in farming. Each one spoke of how their family had begun farming in generations past as well as the future of the farm with their child or children. Jack said that “In four more years we’ll be a century farm... that’s a huge accomplishment, to keep it in the family that long.” His family’s farm has supported five generations now, and the continuation of this family farming history is important for not only him but for all the farmers.

This historically-anchored farmer identity was underscored throughout the interviews by many anecdotes of how much the role of farming has modernized in comparison to the past due to the greater complexity and diversity of tasks.

[I]n farming, the big change is, my grandfather could keep in a small little notebook what he did for the year. Now, I’m an accountant, I’m a lawyer, I am probably my own consultant when it comes to what chemicals to use, and I talk with different people and stuff like that, I’m also a negotiator because you’re always buying or doing something, trying to get the best thing for the least price. And, no question you’re a politician. – Roger

This evidences the perspective of farming as a historically-grounded experience of modernized but varying tasks. Following Narotzky and Smith\textsuperscript{40}, I would like to reiterate how I am approaching historicity within this ethnography. Discussing the historically-grounded nature of agriculture serves not to describe agriculture's past but to examine its current interaction with its multiple histories, that is, how its current state affects the construction and interpretation of histories and how those histories in turn affect the identity of what it means to currently be involved with agriculture.

In this light, the above quotes demonstrate that contemporary farmers craft their histories as deeply personal and valuable, dealing with family history and how the farm came to be what it currently is, as well as a kind of simpler time in which farming did not involve the number of factors that it currently entails. The modernized nature of farming was a theme that occurred again and again - from Jessica’s discussion of modern higher yields, to Frank’s notes on international crop variety breeding efforts, to Tom’s opinions on the high-tech and progressive cattle raising systems that his neighbors are implementing, it was evident that agriculture is very much at place in our contemporary world of technology, internationalism, and advancement from our past.

Socially, as well, farmers have noticed a change of community sense based on technology. Frank explained that dryland wheat farmers still retained a fairly strong social bond and community due to their similarities. Farmers that have employed irrigation on their property\textsuperscript{41} often don’t have that traditional community sense, and the ones that do tend to be “the old-timers, you know, they were in there when they first started the irrigated stuff, you know, so


\textsuperscript{41} This isn’t a recent technological advancement in itself. In this locale, however, large-scale government-organized irrigation projects have changed the agricultural and therefore social/economic landscape significantly within many living farmers’ lifetimes.
that’s a little different than the newer ones.” The past is seen as a time with a different, more tight-knit, community sense within farmers and “when you have social functions that affect the dryland community, you draw more of those in together... not like you used to in the old days, completely, but you still have a little bit of that aspect.” The farming community may not be quite as tightly knit as in the past, but the farmers I interviewed have the opinion that it does have a community sense that is more reminiscent of past eras than most of society. This is one more aspect of agriculture that seems antiquated; although many farmers have satellite TV and smartphones, and I would guess that most have internet access at their houses they still retain the community sense of a bygone era.

We have seen how agriculture is antiquated and how farmers have their identities grounded in the past, as well as seeing how agriculture in the USA is quite modernized and is experienced as having progressed significantly from previous times. Studying history, here, becomes an active process of historicizing the present and defining agriculture as, in relation to the past, both belonging to previous eras and having changed drastically since those times. This dichotomy, of antiquity and modernization, is the first contradiction that provides the basis for understanding agricultural self-concept. In reference to my theoretical model, we can see that the construction and interaction with history are evident. Also, the situatedness of contemporary agriculture as a technologically advanced way of filling an ancient role displays a type of concrete abstraction, or condition of the possibility of social reproduction, that is a key to my theoretical basis. Technology and antiquity interacting create the environment for the reproduction of a social world that is both antiquated and modernized without having the two opposing ideas conflict. Another contradiction provides us with a concrete abstraction is nearly

---

42 This is to display that farmers have the ability to interact in the contemporary social reality of the USA via the common current technologies, but not necessarily to say that they actually use them in this way.
as self-evident as the antiquated/modernized dichotomy: Agriculture’s role as both peripheral and central.

**Contradiction II. Peripheral vs Central**

In a discussion regarding the nature of agriculture, it seems to be self-evident that agriculture is physically located on a developed society's periphery. Cultivation of staple crops takes large amounts of space, which is especially apparent when considering the large-scale *monoculture* methods prevalent in America today. This space tends to be found outside the population centers, such as cities and suburbs, which constitute the economic and cultural centers of a post-industrial society. While this is also involved in constructing the vestigial/necessary contradiction that we will later consider, more directly it is evidence of the literally peripheral nature of agriculture.

Agriculture may be located on the periphery, but to farmers it is the central and defining fact of life. As we saw in the last contradiction, the history of the farm and region is important to a farmer. This can be seen from a geographical perspective as well such that the farm, a specific location that is located at a distance from societal-level socioeconomic centers, is in fact the center of the life story that constitutes the farmer’s existence.

This peripheral nature of farming was summed up well by Tom as we were discussing government regulation and involvement in agriculture. He told about a farm visit by some government officials who were shown…

…the amount of chemical that we actually spread on one acre. And it’s just literally, by the time you mixed it all up and put it in the water, it was just like a thimbleful, which you spread out. These people have no clue, they think we’re just saturating the ground. So, you have all these people who are so far removed from the farm that they don’t know what we do any more.

He is explaining how individuals in the government who are supposed to be working with farmers to develop policies are distanced from agriculture and don’t know much about their own
subject matter. We can see, then, how someone who doesn’t have to deal with agriculture at all would be even further separated from it and that farmers would seem even more peripheral than they do to these officials. This is an example of agriculture being on the political periphery, which is important but impacts on the farming lifestyle less than being increasingly economically and demographically peripheral to the general population.

Many rural areas, in contrast to urban/suburban areas’ growth, are experiencing a decline in population. This exacerbates the population imbalance between rural and urban areas. Individuals like Roger identify a key cause of this occurrence; due to better technology, in farming “we do with three of us what it took about dozen or twenty people to do, and we do it way faster... There’s less people here to work.” Fewer jobs are available in agricultural areas because of the greater efficiency, so the area cannot economically support a large population. The decreased economic and demographic significance of agriculture is the basis of the vestigial/necessary contradiction that we will discuss later, but for the purpose of understanding agriculture’s peripheral nature we just should note that rural areas are often doomed (almost definitionally) to a small population that is outside economic and social centers.

Although it exists on the political, demographic and economic peripheries, the literal physical distance from population centers is the most salient example of agriculture’s peripheral nature. Jessica said that many people see where her family farm is and “don’t understand [and they ask] ‘how can you stand it out there?’ and to me, it’s because pretty much it’s all I’ve known. But, I like it, I love it, so I can handle it.” This is a perfect explanation of the structures of feeling that surround the contradiction of peripheral and central. To her acquaintances, living

---

“out there” on a farm is incredibly different and distant from the norm. But to her, and to any given farmer, the farm is a place that is central to her life story and is a place that she loves more than any city or town. Farmers in this way appropriate the periphery into being the center of their worldview.

Roger says that that most contemporary Americans are accustomed to being close to stores and other people and to having the conveniences of modern society. “If you forgot the milk you can go get it, or whatever, and we don’t have that out here. You have to drive a ways in order to accomplish the simple everyday tasks.” The distance from basic necessities changes farmers’ experience with “simple everyday tasks” and distinguishes their lifestyle from individuals who live closer to population centers. It is important to note that the farmers still are reliant on population centers for as wide of a range of consumer products as most Americans, but they are distanced from those population centers they are reliant on.

Farmers are distanced from the socioeconomic centers of the society in which they reside while still being active members of it; contemporary farmers accomplish this active membership in the distanced society largely through the technology and mobility that the present day provides. These allow farmers to remain active in both the periphery and center, with the center of their own lives being the very periphery of society. This is a critical concrete abstraction to understand in the construction of farming self-concept; the locating of one’s center on the periphery of society while retaining the ability to play an active role in both locations allows for the perpetuation of an identity that reasonably belongs to both. Farming is experienced by farmers as peripheral because it is located on the edges of their society yet central because it is the site where they live, and the modern farmer integrates both of these into an identity situated

\footnote{As noted in the antiquated/modernized section, items such as smartphones and new cars are often parts of the farmers’ lives. They just live much further away from the stores than most customers do. When I say necessities, this includes all of the items and services that constitute contemporary involvement in consumer society; this isn’t limited to sustenance but extends to transportation, telecommunication, fashion, entertainment, etc.}
and constructed at the juncture of these. The internalization of both peripheral and central becomes a key element of the conditions of the possibility of the social reproduction of the modern farmer.

**Contradiction III. Vestigial vs Necessary**

Just as I discussed above in the section regarding the contradiction between the antiquated and modernized aspects of agriculture, specialization of labor is a central factor in defining another contradiction. This next dichotomy is that of agriculture in developed societies experiencing itself as both vestigial and necessary.

Specialization of labor is, as we have seen, facilitated by agriculture and reciprocally casts agriculture as antiquated. This characterization could also be seen as saying that agriculture is prior to specialization. Agriculture, in this light, is a kind of initial specialization from which other specializations can arise. Seen over the course of human history, a trend of increasing specialization growing out of this first specialization can be traced\(^\text{45}\). In the contemporary US, however, we have become somewhat of a hyperspecialized society. This is not a positive or negative trait; rather, it is a description of the current state of developed societies as creating ever-increasing numbers of socioeconomic niches in which individuals and groups can fit. As a hyperspecialized society, our current specialization relies on past levels of (ever-increasing) specializations. We are so far removed, both temporally and culturally, from the first specialization of the Neolithic Revolution that its value as the impetus for societal creation is easily overlooked. Agriculture may be seen as something of the past and something peripheral, but it can also be seen as something that is no longer necessary.

\(^{45}\text{This is not meant to be a deterministic and totalizing trend but rather a descriptive one for developed societies; for example, from 200 AD to 600 AD the opposite trend could be noted in much of Western Europe.}\)
Agriculture feeds the vast majority of humans and, because of this, it is difficult to imagine that people may think that it would no longer be necessary. Unfortunately, there are two important ways in which farmers do feel the devaluation of their occupation. The first is closely related to economic hyperspecialization and to the current service economy; the second relies on the peripheral nature of agriculture and on the separation that most individuals have from it.

The first manner in which farmers experience agriculture as vestigial is evident in the historical economic shift that the United States has undergone. The nation was founded before the lasting effects of the Industrial Revolution had permanently shifted the economic and social centers of society to the cities; in the early days of our nation, when our culture was becoming ever-more distinct from that of European nations, the nation still functioned economically and politically as an agrarian society. The most powerful individuals in the founding of the USA, such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, were largely owners of large farming estates, and the majority of the initial settlers in the American West moved there in order to farm.

The USA was overwhelmingly agrarian, even through the Industrial Revolution, but has seen a radical shift in the past hundred years. Roger explains that currently farmers constitute “almost less than one percent. One point two three” percent of Americans, whereas at the turn of the last century, in “1900, 84 percent.” Farmers have gone from being the majority of the people in the United States and one of the most important categories of citizens to being relatively irrelevant. This change, from importance to lack thereof, is why I have called this societal role vestigial.

The demographic shift from majority to minority is not the manner in which the vestigial nature of agriculture is felt most strongly, however. The demographic shift can be thought of as the concrete shift in the possibilities for social worlds, and as such seems irreversible. On the other hand, the structures of feeling associated with agriculture have also shifted into a vestigial
place in the common psyche. Farmers feel as though the majority of society is disassociated from farming and they have a disconnection and ignorance regarding their food and its sources. Roger says that he doesn’t feel like “people think about the heritage involved or left, or the historical significance and the purpose of what you’re doing, how important it is to feed people.” Instead, people see food as simply originating from stores or restaurants and not considering where it came from before those places. He tells a story of a time his mother was driving through a city with a steer (castrated bull) in a trailer, and she began talking to some young people eating McDonalds who didn’t know where the hamburger came from. His mother told them that “it came from a steer [and they replied] ‘I’m not eating that any more’ you know, and I’m not doing this and that, and on and on, [they had] no registration in their mind of where it comes from.” Although eating is a necessary act, farmers feel as though most people in the USA today simply don’t place any importance on or thought into the agricultural origin of their food.

Jack echoed this sentiment in his assessment of America’s perception of agriculture:

As the population increased, more urban people moved in [to Washington]. Pretty soon farming, we became 2 percent of the population. Well, pretty soon we became a minority. And then you have people... saying that in about five or six years, we’re going to be importing all our food. We don’t need farmers. OK, that is foolish. But, that shows you what has happened. And so, since then, we have really, at least in the state of Washington, have really tried to get our message out, and let people know.

This statement, by a grandfatherly farmer in eastern Washington, excellently summarizes the structures of feeling that typifies the subjective experience of the farmers that I have interviewed and known. Farmers experience their occupations and their lives as having decreased, and continuing to decrease, in importance. They feel as though society is abandoning them in favor of purchasing products from abroad but disapprove of this abandonment, not only from the perspective of businesspeople who rely on domestic markets, but also because they believe it is a bad decision for a society to be a net importer of resources. They act within their
decreasing demographic and economic power to the greatest extent possible in order to retain personal and societal self-reliance. And, following all of these structures of feeling, they seek to change the societal perspective on agriculture in order to alter and reinvigorate the importance of agriculture in the public eye.

Contradiction IV. Powerless vs Fundamental

Farmers, as we have seen, feel as though the role they play in a post-industrial society such as the US may seem vestigial but is in fact necessary. The influence of this characterization of agriculture cannot be underestimated and is related to, but is relatively passive in comparison to, the contradiction between farmers’ lack of agency combined with their fundamental role in agriculture.

According to the farmers in the area, the history of eastern Washington as part of the US is largely the history of settlers staking claims to areas of land and farming them. This embodies a very Western idea of individual control over one’s domain and future, and it can be safely said that the area’s modern history is founded on the ideals of self-reliance and independence from outside influence. Contemporary agriculture presents us with an inversion of this situation, however; in reality, farmers have very little power to act independently and are heavily influenced by outside factors. This lack of agency contrasts not only with the past ethos of independence but also with farmers’ role as isolated producers who are critical to both agriculture and society.

The first manner in which farmers are critically important yet lack agency is within the agricultural system. This may seem counterintuitive, but on an international scale farmers are at the whims of many varying and often dispassionate factors. These include market forces,

---

46 This idea, self-reliance, is a central aspect of American culture, but it is becoming increasingly vestigial as well. In a global society and economy interdependence may be more beneficial than independence. The ways in which farmers enact their preference for self-reliance may be indicative of a kind of practiced agency, or action that shapes the possibility for future actions, by limiting farmers’ opportunities for collective action.
political agendas, and the structure of the industry itself. Each of these serves to strip a farmer of the economic independence that owning a production-oriented business would seem to provide.

Commodity exchange markets’ influence on farmers may be the most evident arena in which individuals have lost all semblance of independence. On commodity exchange markets futures for crops can be bought or sold like stock in a company, and these transactions influence actual commodity prices. They are supposed to be indicative of trends in supply and demand for critical commodities but, like stock markets, can artificially inflate or deflate prices, and even may seem unrelated to actual commodities. “The other day we had three days where the futures went down three days in a row and our price rose twenty cents [a bushel],” said Roger, going on to explain that the various factors causing these trends are numerous but often ambiguous. These price fluctuations may be simply a return or loss on an investment for those individuals buying and selling futures, but they can mean success or bankruptcy for a farmer.

The farmers I talked to were more interested in a different aspect of market forces, however: Internationalism. Roger explained that…

The way the world is now, if one country has a lapse in the ability to produce their minimum needs that causes a ripple throughout the whole world. The example was well founded when Russia… had to keep [wheat] internally to feed their own people. That sent a ripple that punched our wheat price.

Commodity prices not only are out of the control of the farmers, but are often weather-related and out of the control of any given entity. This reliance on forces completely out of anyone’s control takes away farmers’ expectation of self-determination. There are still methods for attempting to control one’s destiny, however untrustworthy they may be:

I would call it [acting on market trends] an intelligent observation. No, I’d call it the SWAG system, are you familiar with that? Scientific Wild Ass Guess. You have the
information, and you’ve got it together, but there’s that unknown black hole of “OK, if they do, they don’t, they do, they don’t” - Roger

Farmers do try to control their situation to a degree, then, but still accept that there are many external and seemingly arbitrary factors that have an enormous impact on their decisions.

In the social/political realm farmers feel as though they have lost an enormous amount of agency due to media and regulatory factors, primarily in regard to environmental concerns. Although this has caused frustration, there is a positive side as well. Environmental concern is a realm in which they have managed to improve agriculture as well as carve out a degree of agency through self-regulation.

Tom conveys this frustration very clearly when he points out that “Look at what they’re doing with the environmental movement today. You look at where they’re going with it, and how they’re using the environment to basically try to control every part of our lives in farming.” From water usage to burning rights to chemical application, the environmental movement is seen as a tool of the media and government to control agriculture. This isn’t as extreme as it may initially seem, however; Tom isn’t promoting conspiracy theories but is noting that media misrepresentations and heavy-handed but misguided government regulations only serve to exacerbate rather than alleviate problems. From the apple to the lumber industries, Jack told stories of how the news media sensationalized stories and severely damaged agriculture in the process.

The media is not the only institution using environmental concerns to control agriculture, however, and environmental government regulation is also disliked. “Wheat growers saw what

happened [when regulations were being put on grass growers] and they didn’t want that to happen, so we self-regulate ourselves” and forged a deal with the Washington State Department of Ecology. In this way farmers can carve out a degree of agency; by complying with regulations and working with the government or with media, farmers can develop areas of freedom from outside influence while being in a constructive interaction with those influencing entities. The environmental movement is still seen as a method of control, but in this context it is also seen as a way to be better stewards of the land. Tom noted that “We have learned how to manage the soil, we’ve learned how to manage the ground. Environmentally, the movement, it has done a lot of good things. I mean, unfortunately, like everything, you’ve got a bunch of radical people that want to keep pushing and pushing.” It is this pushing that farmers don’t like because it is indicative of ever-tightening spheres of agency. Reaching a compromise and staying true to an agreement is acceptable, but even these condition the possibilities for farmers by forcing them to operate within specified parameters. Farmers see both media and government as providing the conditions of their agency, and attempt to exert that agency within those conditions by seeking publicity and by taking political action.

The structure of the agricultural industry itself also serves to limit the agency of the farmers I interviewed. Wheat farmers in southeastern Washington buy input materials for farming (such as fertilizer, machinery, and fuel) that have been manufactured by massive corporations. They then work on their farm to produce their crop, wheat, which they in turn sell to one of several massive corporations dealing in food commodities and transportation. The companies that have the infrastructure and capital to buy large quantities of wheat are international in scale and have the ability to purchase it from whichever region they can acquire

This isn’t always true, strictly speaking. Various local co-ops or regional businesses exist that buy commodities, and input materials are likewise bought from relatively small retailers. The key to understanding the system, however, is that companies with a scope beyond the region set prices for these types of transactions.
it for the lowest price; this puts our local farmers in direct competition with farmers around the world. This is unsurprising and is a process that has been repeated throughout countless industries, but what is most notable is the incredible discrepancy in power relations between the producer and purchaser of these crops.

Farmers literally cultivate their product from being dirt to being a marketable food product. They do what would be considered the fundamental work of agriculture; we can imagine agriculture without complex transportation or milling technologies and without futures markets, but we cannot imagine an agriculture without farming. They do the “dirty work” of labor- and resource-intensive production. Processing and transportation companies shy away from entering this realm of agriculture; they retain much more control over their business by simply extracting the commodity, already produced, from whichever market offers it for the lowest price.\(^{49}\) Frank explains one aspect of this power imbalance when he says that “there’s competition [between companies for buying wheat], but they’ll dock you [pay you less] real hard for something and then they’ll take someone else’s and blend it with it and bring it up, you know, and making big money off of that.” By doing this, companies can choose at will to pay a farmer less than the market price for a quantity of wheat because it doesn’t pass a (sometimes unrepresentative) test of quality. In this way, companies exert their control over farmers. Farmers have no control over their price besides deciding when to sell, while companies can adjust their offered price at will.

Yet another way in which farmers experience powerlessness as they fulfill a fundamental role in agriculture is that of farm structure and family relations. Contemporary farm structure is

\(^{49}\) This allows freedom to purchase from the least expensive market, while also avoiding the labor and land-cost overheads associated with farming.
complex due to fragmented inheritances\textsuperscript{50} and tax laws, and Frank explains that the way that something as simple as a “family farm” is actualized “has changed a lot. If you were a family farm you were a family farm. Now you may be a corporation, you may have partnerships in with part of this and that... A family farm could be a family farm but on paper it wouldn’t look like it.” Because contemporary family farms have a fragmented and corporatized structure, they often make for difficult relations within the shareholders in the farm.

Once the ownership of a farm has been fragmented through several generations of inheritance it is quite likely that the farm is owned in small parts by quite a few people, the majority of whom live away from the farm. “When one generation passes on, instead of two people four people own it,” as Frank said, and “you’re spreading it so thin that the operator doesn’t own much of it.” This makes it so the farmer who actually lives on the family property and continues the tradition of the family occupation actually has very little power because he or she is at the mercy of the decisions of many different relatives who “live in a city somewhere. And they’re, used to, OK, everything’s bought for an investment.” But, in the words of Frank, “what can you do? Everyone owns it.”

The last and most personal way in which farmers lack agency is in their relationship with the farming occupation itself. Farming appears to be an independent and voluntary enterprise but, due the familial relations just discussed as well as the nature of the occupation and the agricultural system, the reality of modern agriculture is one in which farmers are highly dependent upon others and lack even the self-determination to decide whether they farm or not. Within the agricultural industry and within their families, contemporary farmers are dependent

\textsuperscript{50} Cochrane, A. K. (2012) \textit{Will the circle be unbroken: The inescapable issue of intergenerational succession in American agriculture}. Unpublished manuscript, Pacific University
on the decisions and influences of others, but the loss of agency in their own decision to farm or not seems to be even worse than these.

The first way in which farmers acknowledge this lack of agency is in the inability to choose to farm. Jennifer says that starting farming is “almost impossible to do” because of the financial burden of the startup resources of a viable farm\(^{51}\). This is evident around the region, in that the majority of farmers belong to families who have farmed for several generations\(^{52}\). The individuals I interviewed, as well as those whom I personally know, all inherited their farms; without this head start in the business, they would not have been able to even start farming.

Not only is it next to impossible to simply decide to farm, farming provides discouragement to individuals considering it as an occupation. When asked why farm heirs would choose not to farm, Frank admitted that “I think it’s financial, you know. Why am I going to come back here and farm, [to] see if I can keep it from going under the rest of my life…. even though they might love to be there farming.” The financial insecurity of farming simply doesn’t provide a promising future for young people; Roger points out that “If you’re sharp with computers, or you’re sharp in the health field, quite frankly, it’s just a wide open door” to success and economic stability. Farming is not only difficult to enter, it promises an uncertain financial future.

Once individuals have begun farming their life choices are decreased even further. Roger explains that “I live totally off the farm. I don’t have any outside income... that takes away from my time for farming. It’s, you know, a rock and a hard place.” By becoming a farmer in occupation and lifestyle, farmers serve to limit their opportunities. Frank echoes this sentiment when he states that “when you farm as long as we have and you put everything back in on the

\(^{51}\) Between the expenses of property, machinery, and a full year’s operations before receiving the first harvest paycheck, it is extremely cost-prohibitive for individuals to enter farming in this region.

\(^{52}\) No farmer I interviewed had a farm less than 50 years old.
farm, pretty much, that you farm, [farming]’s what you do.” Farming becomes the entirety of a farmer’s future because of the personal and financial commitment that they have to invest. This situation becomes even more scary when the issue of inheritance fragmentation plays a role; because, in Frank’s words, “the farmer doesn’t own the whole farm anymore... so that doesn’t give them [the option of choosing] OK, I can sell this whole farm and get my money back. They don’t own it all.” Farmers put everything they have back into the farm, but cannot profit from their toil because they no longer are owners of the very property they are living on. In this way farmers are bound to their farm and have no way of exiting their situation.

The lack of agency in their dedication to the farm may seem bad for farmers, but it is often not experienced as wholly negative. Farmers take their inability to not-farm and integrate it into two of the most revelatory structures of feeling in farmer self-concept: valuing the farm over the farmer, and conflating the two. Jack explains that “you will sacrifice yourself to keep the farm. A job you won’t do that... You’re going to sacrifice to keep the farm because that’s your, that’s your way of life.” Farmers may lose their agency due to their occupation, but they find their lives because of their occupation as well. This is the way in which farmers’ identities are constructed; they accept and even prioritize the overwhelming Other-ness of their occupation, and in doing so transform it into a dichotomous Self that identifies with, and even needs, farming in order to exist.

---

53 This could be a fascinating entry point into a Marxist investigation of alienation and agency, but that would be far out of the scope of both my project and expertise.
Conclusion

The construction of the self can be understood as resting upon conditions of the possibilities of social reproduction, the actions which in turn construct social worlds and possibilities, and the phenomenological interpretations and structures of feeling. In each case, farmers manage to integrate aspects that are overwhelmingly attributes of an Other into a cohesive Self. They take the condition of their physical periphery and develop it into a center of their own, though located on society’s periphery. They choose to exert their agency and act in order fill a role that may seem vestigial in today’s society, and in doing so they reaffirm the necessity of that role. They interpret their lives as having diminished independence and opportunity, but they embrace that life by developing an identity that is nearly synonymous with the farm and that couldn’t exist without it.

Each of these contradictions seems to be becoming more pronounced; historically farmers had been more independent, socially and economically relevant, and demographically stronger than the present day. As the contradictions giving rise to farmers’ self-concept become more difficult to integrate into a single identity, I believe that the inverse will also happen; the integration of disparate roles and identifications into a single self-concept will force the identity of what it means to be a farmer to be increasingly specific and demanding. Roger poses a critical question, “why would you want to stay on the farm unless you really like it?” The other side of that question is, Why would you like the farm unless you stayed on it?

In moving from one contradiction to the next we can see how farming is an amalgamation, created via dialectical oppositions, of various aspects of Other and Self. We can also see how this integration may be becoming more difficult. Constructing an identity from opposing roles and ideas must have a grounding somewhere, and we have seen that farmers’ self-concept is grounded in their identification with, and as part of, their farm. While the structures of
feeling that comprise this identification can be approached indirectly through describing various dialectical oppositions, explaining these structures of feeling precisely may be beyond words; Roger hints at this when he explained why he farmed by saying “I like it. I can’t explain, it’s kind of like poets have written for years about love. They always write songs about love. Has anyone been able to define it? Not really.”
Appendix I

Consent Script

You are invited to participate in a research study on lived histories of agricultural communities. These histories are personal accounts of events that will help form an idea of how the experiences, identities and histories of farmers vary in different areas around the world. The project has been approved by the Pacific University IRB, and will be completed by April 2013. It will take place in agricultural areas in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. To participate in this study you must be at least 18 years of age and have first-hand experience with agriculture in the region you live. This study will focus on a short series of informal interviews involving you as a participant and Aaron Cochrane as the primary researcher. These interviews will include questions about how you and your family have been involved in agriculture, how agriculture has changed, and how agriculture has impacted who you are. There should be minimal risk to you. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without prejudice or negative consequences. Your acknowledgement of the information of this statement, and consent to participate in this research is assumed if you choose to continue with this interview. There are no direct benefits to you from this study. Participants will not be paid for their participation. The results of the study will provide better information about agricultural communities and their identities.

Aaron Cochrane, Researcher.

Phone (509)366-1379

coch0319@pacificu.edu
Appendix II
Sample Interview Questions

1. How long have you been involved in agriculture?
2. How long has your family been involved in agriculture?
3. Can you tell me about changes in your family?
4. Has your agricultural community experienced changes?
5. What kinds of changes have you witnessed in agriculture?
6. What is your opinion on economic issues that agricultural communities have faced?
7. How has the meaning of farming changed?
8. Why do you farm?
Appendix III

Participant Profiles

Frank - Male owner-operator with grown children who don’t farm
Jennifer - Female owner-operator with grown children who don’t farm
Tom - Male owner-operator with elementary-age children
Jack - Male owner-operator, father and coworker of Tom
Michael - Male farm worker, employee of Tom and Jack
Roger - Male owner-operator with grown children who farm part-time
Appendix IV

Working Definitions

**Dialectical Opposition**: The interaction between disparate forces, ideas or roles, which produces a novel state, entailing both conflict and compromise, within the individual or group that experiences the interaction.

**Dryland**: Crop production without the use of irrigation. Dryland wheat farming regions are predominantly devoted to the cultivation of non-irrigated wheat, with occasional rotation of crops such as canola or barley.

**Futures**: “Futures are contracts that require traders to buy or sell assets at a set price at a set date in the future. Futures caught on in agriculture by allowing farmers and other food producers to lock in the prices they would get for crops even before harvest time. Futures contracts allow investors to "hedge," or protect themselves in case of big moves in the price of an asset in the future.”

**Hyperspecialized**: Economic basis of a society in which each worker fulfills a very specific role in their workplace and industry. The current level of job specialization is compared to past degrees of specialization to view contemporary labor systems as hyperspecialized.

**Identity Politics**: Political or social attitudes that focus on the concerns of social groups identified on the basis of common traits or experiences.

**Marginalization**: The process of losing power over one’s own economic, political, and social states. “Marginalized” refers to a position of powerlessness over one’s future in these realms.

**Owner-operator**: An individual who has a dual interest in a specific agricultural enterprise. The first of these is in the ownership of at least a fraction of the property involved in the enterprise. The second is that the money earned by working for the enterprise, above that which would be earned simply by owning a portion of it, provides necessary income to the individual.

**Post-industrial**: Relating to an economy or nation in which the relative importance of manufacturing lessens and that of services and information, grows.

**Self-concept**: The whole set of attitudes, opinions, and cognitions that a person has of himself or herself

---

54 Krantz, Matt (2012) *Stock index futures can give insight into the trading day.* USA Today. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/perfi/columnist/krantz/story/2012-06-18/stock-index-futures/55673500/1
**Snowball sampling:** A research sampling method relying on referrals from initial subjects to find additional subjects. This technique does not attempt to represent a cross section of the population.

**Western:** Pertaining to the culture, society and economy of the majority of Europe and the countries and regions historically based on British influences including but not limited to Australia, the USA, and Canada. This term is not meant to be overly specific or descriptive and is by no means a generalization as to the homogeneity of these regions; the majority of its use in this paper is simply as a reference to societies that would traditionally be considered “First-World”, post-industrial, service-economy, etc.
Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the input and support of many individuals. First and foremost, I would like to thank my professors and classmates at Pacific University for their continued input and their passion for Anthropology. Specifically I would like to recognize my advisor Professor Cheleen Mahar, along with Professors Aaron Greer, Chris Wilkes, and Dane Joseph, for helping me to understand and actualize the theories and methods that became this thesis. I would also like to thank my family for the opportunity to live an agrarian life as well as the connections they provided me with others in the community. Lastly, I would like to thank those farmers who participated in my research— their input may have seemed trivial while we were drinking iced tea and chatting about the price of wheat, but they were in fact extremely insightful. I owe this thesis to them.