No Farm, No Food: Organizing Appalachian Family Farms around
the Politics of ‘Good Food’

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Natalie E. Shubert
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This dissertation titled

No Farm, No Food: Organizing Appalachian Family Farms around the Politics of ‘Good Food’

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation reports an in-depth qualitative study of the experiences, paradoxes, and tensions that constrain and enable small family farms (less than 100 acres) in the southeast Ohio Appalachian region. The southeast Ohio farmers have formed an agricultural community that creates a strong local food system and boasts one of the best farmer’s markets in the nation. Contrary to national agricultural statistics, which highlight the declining number of farmers, I examine the lives, interactions, and experiences of farming families in an area where the number of farmers is growing. Through extensive research and relying on the theoretical framework of Dewey (1927), I provide an organizational communication analysis of informal organizational and community organizing.

This dissertation analyzes the organizing practices of area farmers shaping the local food economy and explores how these farming families negotiate tensions and paradoxes inherent to family farms, which serve as sites for both agriculture production and family homes. Through studying organizational vocational and anticipatory socialization (Jablin, 1987), processes of organizational identification (Cheney, 1983), and non-traditional organizational structures (Harter & Krone, 2001), I examine the unique local food system made by family farmers’ informal organizational structure(s) in southeast Ohio Appalachia and their organizing practices in the name of ‘good food.’
The findings of this study conclude that farmers in the Appalachian area organize themselves in a very successful manner, yet outside of traditional and alternative understandings of organizational structure and organizational socialization. The results of this study revolve around five main themes: the democratization of farming, the politics of family farming, farming as occupation and identity, the contested meaning of ‘good food,’ and the role community plays in thinking globally while acting locally.

Results of the analysis highlight tensions created by the presence of the government in the regulation of farming, the inescapable political statements made by farmers due to their growing methods, the socialization of and identity into the farming occupation, the similarities and differences of the Appalachia area compared to the slow food movement, the trials, tribulations, and experiences of farming families in the quest to grow, sell, and consume good food, the farmers’ approach to food as a social movement, and the role family farmers play in relation to the neighboring community, town, county, state, and nation.

I argue that this farming community succeeds without a formal or recognizably alternative organizational structure (see Harter & Krone, 2001), and more is left to learn about how these populations informally organize themselves around social and environmental movements. Practical implications for these farming families, limitations of the study, and directions for future research are also discussed.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Scott Titsworth
Associate Professor of Communication Studies
PREFACE

The Farmer Feeds Them All

The politician talks and talk,
The actor plays his part;
The soldier glitters on parade,
The goldsmith plies his art.
The scientist pursues his germ
O’er the terrestrial ball,
The sailor navigates his ship,
But the farmer feeds them all.

The preacher pounds the pulpit desk,
Brokers read their lengthy tape;
The tailor cuts and sews his cloth,
To fit the human shape.
The dame of fashion, dressed in silks,
Goes forth to dine and call,
Or drive, or dance, or promenade,
But the farmer feeds them all.

The workman wields his shiny tools,
The merchant shows his wares;
The astronaut above the clouds
A dizzy journey dares.
But art and science soon would fade,
And commerce dead would fall,
If the farmer ceased to reap and sow,
For the farmer feeds them all.

(Copied, K. Karg, 1993)
This dissertation is made possible in part by my older sister Jackie, who cleared the path early on so that I may trail blaze.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and father and all the farmers out there who ‘work until the work is done.’
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks needs to be given to my dissertation committee for providing unwavering support, advice, and encouragement. To Dr. B., thank you for countless meaningful and insightful conversations, and for believing in me: You set an incredible example of how to balance the most important parts of life. To Dr. Graham, who gave incredible reading suggestions and showed pivotal enthusiasm in my research, all while serving as a superior professional role model: I sincerely appreciate all of your involvement in my research. To Dr. Lynn Harter, whose intense intelligence, warmth, generosity, understanding, compassion, assertiveness, and faith in me knows no bounds that I can see: You are with me every time I step into a classroom to teach. To Dr. Scott Titsworth, for providing council, direction, and rock-solid support from the very beginning: You have made me a better writer, teacher, and thinker. I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to absorb and celebrate knowledge with you throughout this academic and personal journey. Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

NO FARM, NO FOOD: ORGANIZING APPALACHIAN FAMILY FARMS AROUND THE POLITICS OF ‘GOOD FOOD’

I woke up in the morning to find three pieces of licorice hanging from the kitchen ceiling. A big piece of masking tape held the butcher string to the foam board ceiling, and the string was tied around the end of the licorice. The pieces were hung at three different heights, one each for my older sister, younger brother, and myself. We were excited to see the licorice hanging but also knew this meant that we most likely wouldn’t get to see our father today, just as we hadn’t seen him last night. Our mom made us go to bed long before he came in for the night, and he left long before we woke up. We jumped to grab our piece of licorice and thought it to be wildly liberating to eat licorice before breakfast. Our mother shuffled us around the house urging us to get ready before the bus came, and I headed off to third grade at the local rural country grade school in Southern Illinois.

In the fall and spring, it was common for our father to work 16 hour days. This is the life of a farmer. The spring time is a time for critical judgment and planting. The fall is a time to harvest the year’s crop. Some years it goes well and our father is a joy to be around, exclaiming “Christmas presents for everyone!” and some years, when the crops aren’t so good, we knew to behave a little better because as children, we could feel the tension in the air. Unbeknownst to me as a child, my parents spent the first ten years raising their children living virtually hand-to-mouth. Every year was the year that could ruin the family farm. Smaller farmers around us were selling out each year, the public sale of land being the shame and humiliation to the seller and a too-close reminder to the other local farmers that it could be them next year.

My father is still farming and has seen the highs and lows of over thirty years working the ground. His identity as a farmer reaches as deep as his bones and four generations back. The land he owns was given to him by his father, which was given to him by his father. It was only in the past ten years that my mother took a job outside of the home and started working for corporate-supported health insurance. The premiums alone were enough to keep my parents up at night, wondering how self-employed farmers were supposed to pay exorbitantly high rates yet still could not afford to be sick. My family was lucky. Everyone seemed to get sick after my mother started earning the family health insurance. To this day, my father calls his insurance card “The Gold Card,” and while it embarrasses me to have him announce this at the dentist and doctor’s office, it is his way of appreciating my mother’s hard work and remembering a time when he didn’t have first-class health care.

Growing up on a dairy and grain farm has undoubtedly shaped me into the woman I have become. It was not until I moved away to college that I had to buy ground beef in a grocery store. I remember calling home asking my mom why there were number ratios on the packages and what they meant. She explained it but then warned me that I wouldn’t like it as much as what we got from the local butcher who sold meat from cows raised within ten miles of the store. Walking into the local butcher market and seeing the
hind quarters of a cow on the butcher table and then asking for meat which the butcher cut directly off the animal was a common occurrence for us.

The double-extra-large-tall white t-shirts and standard denim blue jeans have been my father’s work uniform for as long as I can remember. In the colder times of year, the flannel plaid shirts come out and both shirts are always tucked into the jeans with the same brown leather belt. The brown leather belt is my father’s weight scale; he judges his health based on which belt hole is used. The belt has been used for years and over time he has punched his own holes in the belt to get it just perfect, which is the way he runs his business. Very attuned to details and tenacious about preventing rust, my father jokes about being “just a dumb farmer.” As a child, I wholeheartedly agreed with him about being a “dumb farmer,” and often criticized him for picking a career that was dependent upon something as unpredictable as the weather. “Why don’t you get a real job?” was the attitude of a young teenager, and my father, to this day, reminds me of this phrase every chance he gets.

Whereas most children grew up watching their mothers and fathers leave for work but not actually watch them work, I grew up watching my mother and father work. Their workplace was our home and family farm. I watched my father climb ladders and grain bins in our yard, drive tractors and combines around the farm, empty grain trucks and fill grain bins, sweep his machine shop, change the oil in his trucks and tractors, figure out the yearly income at his desk, negotiate with seed salesmen and crop insurance adjustors at our kitchen table, forecast future grain contracts, monitor the weather patterns, and patiently accept whatever the yearly crop brought. Sundays were a day of rest and I cannot remember my father ever, even in the busiest of seasons, breaking this commandment. My mother was my father’s right hand, driving grain trucks, helping plant crops, bringing food to the field, and offering support every step of the way. It was not uncommon to be picked up from school in a grain truck in between loads to the grain elevator. I knew what my parents did at their job because they did it in our house and in our yard, right in front of us.

The life of living off and through the land is now a profession that I deeply admire and am proud to say is my heritage. Having moved away from the farming community I grew up in, I am now better able to recognize the nuanced culture of a farmer’s life, and I better appreciate the contributions to society as a whole. It is widely known that conservative and traditional farmers can be resistant to change, but my father now receives his weather information from the internet and checks grain prices online which allows him to get the most current prices in a trade where the price can soar or drop in ten minutes. Having come around to the invention of the internet (although he still wonders aloud how it works), he is still resistant to cellular phone adoption. He and my mother, both having proudly completed high school, are quietly proud that all of their children have a college degree. Being the daughter writing her dissertation, my father considers it great fun to tell people that he also holds a Ph.D. in his field. While I am working on my doctorate of philosophy in communication, my father’s joke is that he literally stands in his field holding a post hole digger.
CHAPTER ONE:
PROBLEM STATEMENT

As the number of farmers continues to dwindle, the average age of the American farmer gradually increases (USDA, 2002). The average age of a farmer in the country is currently 56 years old, the oldest average age of farmers in the nation’s history (USDA, 2002). In spite of the growing average age and decreasing numbers of farmers, production is such that less than 2% of the citizens of the United States produce enough food not only for America but for export throughout the world. Of the industries in America, the social phenomenon of family farming is uniquely part of the American social fabric (Meister, 1990).

Farming has slowly become corporatized, and with the outbreak of food-borne illnesses coupled with public criticism of animal treatment, the agribusiness industry has been under intense public scrutiny for at least the past five years (Pollan, 2006). Issues of national concern related to farming include childhood and adult obesity (e.g., Nestle & Jacobson, 2000), grocery stores saturated with processed food (e.g., Nestle et al., 1998; Putnam, Allshouse & Kantor, 2002), and a farming system that cannot sustain itself (e.g., Daily et al., 1998; Wackernagel & Rees, 1998). Embroiled within this social phenomenon is experience. As expressed in the preceding narrative, my experience growing up in a farming family has undoubtedly shaped my values and perspective; the same is likely true for countless others.

Indeed, farming provides multiple experiences as family members (re)discover interconnections with the land, nature, and each other. As such, the purpose of this
project is to use communication theories directly salient to the notion of experience (e.g., Dewey, 1927; James, 1991; Mead, 1963) to investigate the culture of family farms in the Appalachian region of Southeast Ohio. Defined as two connected people (either by birth, marriage, or choice) who join forces by living together and working the same piece(s) of land for the same outcome, family farming is an unusual type of organization that has serious social and civic consequences. Through exploring the experiences, insights, and cultures of family farmers, much can be learned about a slowly expiring American livelihood.

As I sat in a dark theater, watching baby chickens thrown on the ground in a depiction of industrial chicken farms, I began to feel more and more conflicted. Sick, almost. The International Film Festival I attended was opening its festival with a one-time screening of Food for Thought, which examines conventional, industrial, and sustainable farming practices. I have previously watched King Corn (2007), also provocative and controversial, but Food for Thought was a much more shocking experience for me.

The filmmakers visited several industrial farms throughout the Midwest and examined the living and health conditions of the animals. Interspersed among the shocking and saddening images of how some animals are treated were interviews with farmers defending their stance on commercially-grown poultry and beef. As I sat in the dark theater watching the husband and wife farming couple sit on their plaid country couch and admit to not knowing what ingredients, hormones, or antibiotics are in the pre-packaged chicken feed, I felt my cheeks start to burn with a growing sense of desperation
to leave the theater. Could anyone tell by looking at me that I grew up on a conventional farm and that spraying fertilizer and chemicals on the land was the only way I ever understood or knew farming? If the lights were on, would the other film goers see the shame and conflict on my face? I wanted to leave and end the onslaught of conflicting emotions and turmoil the film was inciting in me, but I encouraged myself to sit for just a bit longer.

The wife of the chicken farmer explained that if they didn’t give their chickens antibiotics that all of the chickens would die due to being penned up and sitting in their own waste. Also, the type of feed they give their chickens enables faster growth, which means faster turn-around, multiple harvests, and increased profits. All of which are desirable factors for the farmers.

I sat and thought about the honest look on the wife’s face when she explained (justified) giving antibiotics and growth hormones to the chickens. She petted the toy poodle sitting on her lap for comfort. I could see a similar look on my father’s face when he talks about (justifies) using chemicals on his crops: nitrogen, fertilizer, herbicide, pesticide. Being a conventional farmer, my father fully endorses chemical and genetic crop enhancements. When I see him discuss these issues with other farmers, family members, and friends, I see that look of complete conviction on his face. This same look was on the woman’s face as she talked about the antibiotics and growth hormones. I could hear the audience’s gasps, as though they were saying, ‘This woman can’t honestly believe that what she is doing is right?!?’ But I understood: this woman did believe in their farming practices. As does my father.
I grew up understanding farming to be an honorable and governmentally-subsidized profession. Being the daughter of a farmer who still farms land that has been in the family for at least three generations, I grew up with a deep sense of pride for my father and for my family. My father would often joke that his was the oldest and most important profession. As a child, I felt a connection to the land that helped me figure out who I was: I was a farmer’s daughter. In many ways, I was a farmer myself, as every farming family understood that wives and children assist with the daily operations that enable a farm to function. However, I was a girl, and a child, which meant that my contributions were less valued and did not get the positive label of a farmer. The expectations held for me by my father were to be in the kitchen. Cooking, cleaning, washing dishes, baking pies, cakes, cookies, stews, mashed potatoes, roasting sides of beef, and learning to sew were considered “women’s work,” and it was explicitly stated to me for years that “women’s work” and “men’s work” were different. Whereas I wanted to be outside cutting grass, trimming trees, feeding calves, or exploring in the farm’s many outbuildings, my father would encourage me to be in the kitchen helping my mother.

Despite the gendered understanding my father had of farming work, I grew up knowing who I was. I was a farm kid. I was favored over city kids for jobs, my voice was heard over the other town kids who supposedly lacked common sense, and my ability to work hard was applauded by my teachers and other community members who knew I grew up on a successful farm, in a respectable family, with a good reputation. I have
experienced many benefits and have been favored in many ways simply by being one of the (mythic) farm kids.

Nine years after moving off the family farm for college and graduate school, I sat in a dark theater with shame and conflict burning my cheeks as I tried to tamp down the building desperation I felt. I grew up on a conventional dairy and grain farm. My father uses chemicals and Roundup-Ready soybeans. My father grows corn used to make high-fructose corn syrup. How can my family’s livelihood, the pride and joy of my childhood, be one of the main contributing factors of the current pressing environmental and social problems of today’s time? I began to realize how difficult the journey I was about to embark on would be. I could no longer avoid the ever-growing divide from my adult lifestyle, which includes organically-grown produce acquired from the local farmer’s market, and the lifestyle of my family, which includes a reliance on fried food, Wal-Mart, and pesticides.

My involvement in this topic has ranged from ignorant unawareness as a high school student to now fervently understanding the questions concerned activists pose about our world. Simply stated by Cummings (2009), “We are facing an urgent problem: Given global warming, growing populations, and declining natural resources, how will we feed ourselves?” I am beginning to realize that the moral dilemmas I face when reflecting on my agrarian background and the dilemmas I witnessed in the documentaries on current farming practices are not isolated; these dilemmas are being faced by most family farmers as the landscape of farming is, once again, shifting. My communication background, however, demands that the organizing practices of the community, state, and
government be recognized. Organizational communication offers frameworks for understanding the dynamics of social movements and involvement of multiple, competing parties; Dewey (1927) especially targeted the importance of human experience – especially interrelationships between micro (e.g., interpersonal relations) and macro (e.g., democratic systems) - and the environmental movements centrally relate to corporeal experience and philosophical perspective.

Appalachia and Farming

In this manuscript, I argue that community and family farmers in southeast Ohio Appalachia represent a key nexus in the social movement for environmental sustainability. While the attitudes and beliefs behind organic farming and chemical use in food production are quite varied and debated, the ways in which farmers make sense of and understand these cultural meanings, values, and norms are relevant to the study of organizational communication. Like most farming, Appalachian family farming is fraught with many paradoxes and tensions, but is an example of an ultimate disparity: a history of economic struggle yet bright with the hope of a future in organic farming practices. Analysis of these issues provide meaningful information about the integration of public and private, individual and collective, emotion and reason, stability and change, and potentially, other tensions relevant to unique forms of organizational life.

What the cultural values of farming mean to family farmers, the origin of these values, how various and oftentimes conflicting cultural values influence and drive their farming practices, and what challenges arise by being at the intersection of such driving forces is the main focus of this study. The following overview of literature situates this
study within the larger socio-political context of farming and also contextualizes Appalachian farms within broader trends in American agriculture; such information provides a rationale for how this study is focused.

Awareness and interest in local economies has been on the rise in recent years, in part due to food costs and the increasing carbon footprint size of the food production chain (Pollan, 2006). Attempting to market a region’s unique assets can be beneficial in many ways, especially when that region is otherwise dependent on state and national monies. Appalachia is one of these regions. Stretching from southern New York to northern Alabama, Appalachia has long been considered a culturally backward and poverty-stricken area (Williams, 2002). Income generated from the Appalachian region has traditionally been derived from large-scale logging and the mining of coal, although no long-term financial strategies exist to keep areas economically sustainable (Flaccavento, 2004). Many government initiatives have tried to alleviate poverty in Appalachia, yet disparate access to health care and educational opportunities, as well as childhood and adult obesity, are some of the better-known problems still plaguing the area (Williams, 2002).

The Appalachian region is home to boundless natural resources. A topographically diverse region, the land is fertile and rich in minerals. Small-scale farming has been implemented by many of the families, sometimes to the point of minimizing the importance of formal education. However, the agrarian-oriented population has honed farming practices that are both conventional and focused on sustainable, organic growing. While dominant, conventional U.S. farming practices
utilize modern machinery, genetic modification, herbicides and pesticides (USDA National Organic Program, 2010), Appalachian farming families are able to practice more environmentally sustainable farming methods due to a combination of lack of available resources and government funding paired with a desire to be more sustainable and supportive of local food economies (Bosserman, 2009; Holley, 2009).

Because the Appalachian region has never been able to achieve consistent economic success, depressed social and familial implications result. Not unlike other mountainous regions, the Appalachian area has long dealt with the problems that come with the seeming necessity of either importing capital or exporting people to succeed (Williams, 2002). The importing of capital for the Appalachians has never sustained the region; if anything, Appalachia is now victim to mountain top removal, which despite the economic benefits, has several disastrous environmental and social effects (Reese, 2006).

Even before the Great Depression, historic poverty persisted in Appalachia and affected all inhabitants, especially farmers (Williams, 2002). Since the 1930s, Appalachian farming families were supported through government relief, “either through cash payments or indirect through employment by CWA, PWA, FERA, WPA, or some other among the new ‘alphabet agencies’” (Williams, 2002, p. 315). These alphabet agencies represent the Civil Works Administration, Public Works Administration, Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Works Progress Administration; all forms of government relief set up through the New Deal by President Roosevelt (Thomas, 1998).

Many of the dialectical tensions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and paradoxes farming families (as well as individual consumers) face today were addressed by Wendell
Berry (1977) as early as the 1970s. Berry (1977) clearly saw the impending problems Americans faced, which arguably has only increased in the past 30 years:

I cannot think of any American whom I know or have heard of, who is not contributing in some way to [ecological] destruction. The reason is simple: to live undestructively in an economy that is overwhelmingly destructive would require of any one of us, or of any small group of us, a great deal more work than we have yet been able to do. How could we divorce ourselves completely and yet responsibly from the technologies and powers that are destroying our planet? The answer is not yet thinkable, and it will not be thinkable for some time – even though there are now groups and families and persons everywhere in the country who have begun the labor of thinking it. And so we are by no means divided, or readily divisible, into environmental saints and sinners. But there are legitimate distinctions that need to be made. These are distinctions of degree and of consciousness. Some people are less destructive than others, and some are more conscious of their destructiveness than others. For some, their involvement in pollution, soil depletion, strip-mining, deforestation, industrial and commercial waste is simply a “practical” compromise, a necessary “reality,” the price of modern comfort and convenience. For others, this list of involvements is an agenda for thought and work that will produce remedies. People who thus set their lives against destruction have necessarily confronted in themselves the absurdity that they have recognized in their society. They have first observed the tendency of modern organizations to perform in opposition to their stated purposes. They
have seen governments that exploit and oppress the people they are sworn to serve and protect, medical procedures that produce ill health, schools that preserve ignorance, methods of transportation that, as Ivan Illich says, have “created more distances than they bridge.” And they have seen that these public absurdities are, and can be, no more than the aggregate result of private absurdities; the corruption of community has its source in the corruption of character. This realization has become the typical moral crisis of our time. Once our personal connection to what is wrong becomes clear, then we have to choose: we can go on as before, recognizing our dishonesty and living with it the best we can, or we can begin the effort to change the way we think and live. (p. 18)

Farming, in general, has slowly become a dying occupation. Since the 1960s, the number of principle-occupation farmers in the country has decreased from 6 million farms to 2 million farms; less than 1% of the United State’s population claim to be primary-occupation farmers, and approximately 2% of the country’s population lives on a farm (U.S. EPA, 2007). This means, then, that our nation currently has more prisoners than farmers (Bureau of Justice, 2007; U.S. EPA, 2007), and that these numbers might continue to both rise (for prisoners) and fall (for farmers). Amazingly, less than 2% of the citizens of the United States produce enough food not only for America but for export throughout the world.

The 1930s and the 1980s were the worst times for American family farmers (Neth, 1995). The result of the great depression was easily linked to farming troubles, but the hardships of the 1980s are linked through a complicated chain of events that included
the Cold War, farming in South America, the price of soybeans, and subsequent bankruptcy (Harl, 1990). Many farmers were bankrupted in the 1980s, and as the number of farmers continues to dwindle, even fewer remain today. Partly due to retirement, but also partly due to agribusiness farming mergers and land development, farming is not an occupation that young people are groomed for. According to the United States Department of Agriculture 2008 census, “The decline in the number of farms and land in farms reflects a continuing consolidation in farming operations and diversion of agricultural land to nonagricultural uses” (USDA Demographics, 2009). Whereas young children are cultivated to be “anything they want to be,” rarely do children say they want to be farmers. In a world where food is the basis of life, I find it ironic that children are not encouraged, nor are most able, to enter farming as their occupation.

An impending opportunity awaits farming families in rural Appalachia. The United States, as well as the world, is experiencing the largest social movement in history – a movement uniquely combining localism, environmentalism and social justice (Hawken, 2007). Restoring and protecting the environment is a goal of many independent groups of people, and farming practices are at the forefront of public scrutiny. The opportunity available to the Appalachian region is that the farming practices utilized correlate with the tenets of environmental sustainability. The farming practices, which are implemented due to lack of resources, not trends, fit the growing demand for responsibly-grown produce. The rate of organic goods produced and sold in the country is multiplying by five times each year and has done so for the past five years (Fromartz, 2006). The term ‘organic’ is generally defined by the avoiding the use of synthetic
chemicals, genetic modification, routine use of antibiotics or hormones, or the habitual use of importing soil fertility (USDA National Organic Program, 2010). Given the historical disadvantage of the Appalachian region paired with the growing demand for organic and sustainably-grown food, the Appalachian region stands to finally capitalize on its local natural resources, way of life, and regional flavor.

While this dissertation is not meant to make value judgments about farming practices, ways of life, or degrees of environmental involvement, I do hope to address the competing values that Berry (1977) mentions above. Contextualized within organizational communication literature, family farms are highlighted as organizations standing at the intersection of family communication, environmental communication, social change, community advocacy, and farming. While a great deal of research on each of these areas exists, a unique contribution of this project is how each of these diverse topics is brought together to form a multidimensional perspective for understanding values inherent in Appalachian family farming.

A wealth of literature examining the historical tradition of farming exists, but there is merit in creating more robust frameworks to better understand the lives, experiences and complex perspectives of farming families in Appalachia today. Appalachia family farming is fraught with many contrasts and tensions, and is an example of an ultimate disparity: a history of economic struggle yet bright with the hope of a future in organic farming practices. Considering Appalachia in the structure of the public helps maintain perspective on the roles individual farmers play, how their experiences and cultural values dictate their actions and practices, and how the public,
interpreted through Dewey (1927), work together to create the larger democratic infrastructure of the nation’s food supply.

The culture of Appalachia has been documented and given grant-funded attention, but how has the current global food crisis (see Belasco, 2006; Pollan, 2006, 2008) affected this region, from a familial as well as an organizational communication perspective? More importantly, how do Appalachian farming families make sense of the contradictions and paradoxes presented by conflicting and competing cultural values?

The farming families in Appalachia draw me as a researcher and communication scholar to learn more about their perspectives and understanding of the values associated with farming, environmental ethics, organic farming, and the institutional norms they continually face. Farming in the United States has historically been culturally rooted in certain value structures and paradigms. The social movement for environmental justice and sustainability is rapidly becoming a cultural value (Hawken, 2007). The institutional infrastructure and bureaucracy of food production presents certain issues such as economy of efficiency, economy of scale, and subsidized modes of production which must be acknowledged by individual farmers. In this situation, I contend that the family farm becomes the site of a dynamic intersection of potentially conflicting and colliding driving forces of cultural values.

The Social Movement of Environmental Responsibility

In an era dominated by the technological imperative (i.e., a reliance on technology), a growing sector of the American population is demanding chemical-free and ethically-grown food. This growth has been reported at a steady rate since 1995
(Fromartz, 2006; Pollan, 2006). Even in an age of technological supremacy, a growing population is increasingly concerned with the quality and content of comestibles and the health of the environment. Although popular organic food stores and companies such as Whole Foods, Wild Oats, and Small Planet Foods strive to adhere to strict standards for organics and environmental responsibility, these stores are but drops in the pond of total food sales in the United States; organic foods contribute only 2% to the total yearly food sales in the U.S. (Fromartz, 2006). However, this percentage is growing as the average consumer becomes more concerned and educated with food-related issues. Advocates like ‘food-intellectual’ Michael Pollan and comrades (see Belasco, 2007; Fromartz, 2006; Nestle, 2003; Petrini, 2001; Salatin, 2007) are working to learn more and uncover the motives behind big government in an effort to answer some initially simple questions: Where does our food come from? Who grows it? Who processes it? What happens to people and the environment along the way (Kenner, 2008)? Answers to these questions inevitably involve family farms and can be uniquely explored through the lens of organizational communication. More important to the current project, family farms highlight how communication between and among generations, other family farms, and government agencies conjoin to inform farming practices and respond to the constraining paradoxes and binds placed on family farmers in light of government subsidies, the growing concern and demand for organic food, and the slow demise of family farms.

Incorporating organic products into large national chain box-stores like Wal-Mart is directly related to the potential commerce generated by the organic agriculture industry; commerce to be capitalized upon, yet again, by big business (Mitchell, 2006).
For example, according to Fromartz (2006), many consumers do not realize that Cascadian Farms, an organic food label which instills the values of dew-laden hills in the morning, is owned by Small Planet Foods. Small Planet Foods is owned by General Mills. Becoming a more common practice is the buy-out of smaller, organic companies by food conglomerates. As illustrated in the award-winning documentary *Food, Inc.* directed by Kenner (2008), much of the food sold in grocery stores comes from the same seven or eight big food businesses. However, these big businesses are responding to the growing demand for organics stemming from worried parents and health-conscious individuals using their dollar serve as their voice. As posited by Fromartz (2006),

In buying organic food, consumers become actors in this larger picture of health, contributing to consequences they may not even understand. In a direct way, they are also providing the investment in research and development that the government has largely avoided making in organic farming until very recently. Agribusiness has not pushed deeply into this area, either, since, unlike research into genetically modified corps, the results cannot be patented, owned, and licensed. The only funds to improve organic methods have come from consumers who buy the fruits of this labor. Indeed, if there is an unsubsidized free-market sector in American farming today, it is to be found in organic agriculture. (p. 30)

Fromartz’s (2006) comments illustrate the consumer’s role in a larger democratic process as understood through Dewey (1927), but also the importance and impact culture contributes to individual action. To a certain extent, Giddens’ (1979) concept of agency is applicable to the role individual consumers have in the food economy. What consumers
know about foods and organics is achieved through language and other symbols beyond language - messages delivered from larger institutions. Consumers have a limited amount of power to demand types of food, yet the impart of knowledge is, to a great extent, controlled by the larger democracy.

The culture of the organic movement is important to consider when examining the trend and trajectory of what has become a movement in social justice. The counter-culture of organics which emerged in the 1960s began stigmatized as a marginalized hippie, eccentric, cult-like endeavor, much like the introduction of vegetarians and vegans (Fromartz, 2006; Pollan, 2006). Even when information about the dangers of certain chemicals, particularly DDT, came into intense scrutiny by Rachel Carson in her evocative but controversial 1962 boat-rocking *Silent Spring*, Carson and others like her were lambasted as being narrowly focused on the use of pesticide but ignoring the larger global impact (Frumkin, 2009). From even my first encounter with *Silent Spring* during my master’s program, I can vividly remember my father calling Carson, “‘a whacked out environmentalist’ who contributed to killing millions of people from malaria.” *Silent Spring* introduced the end of neighborhood DDT sprayings as public concern arose surely and swiftly. As a farmer, my father was among the legions of business people outraged at the social impact to chemical companies from Carson’s writings on the dangers of pesticide use. However, the public concern and vehement response from chemical companies on the positive benefits of pesticide use only fueled more attention and publicity. Environmentalists believe, and I agree, that Carson’s writings can be attributed as the turning point from a marginalized hippie movement to a mainstream social issue.
(Frumkin, 2009). With the inception of public awareness of chemical use by Carson in 1962, public concern only grew. The oil spill off the beaches of Santa Barbara, CA in 1969 which made famous the pictures of oil-drenched birds, along with the Cuyahoga River catching fire in the same year due to pollution, solidified the rising environmental concern among the general public (Fromartz, 2006; Frumkin, 2009). These events started to move the culture of environmental awareness more toward mainstream public concern, which has increasingly and steadily picked up pace in the past 40 years.

The current culture of the environmentally-oriented social movement has evolved into nation-wide community efforts to ‘do your part’ to help the environment (Hawken, 2007). Public efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle are now based in elementary schools and neighborhoods with empowerment starting at a young age, including television and music for children with embedded environmental issues (see Eagles & Demare, 1999) or environmental messages embedded in children’s books (see Geisel, 1971). Like most social movements that sustain long enough to instill long-term change, the counter-culture that began as a cult-like craze has become integrated into daily lives. As a sign of further incorporation and adaptation (thus reaching long-term change), the easily recognized ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle’ icon has now been expanded to incorporate additional steps preceding the recycling of waste, such as the 5-step flowchart: ‘Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Reform, Recycle’ (Brother, 2009).

A professor of environmental communication at my undergraduate-granting university, Dr. Laura Perkins, once began a research project focusing on individual connections to the earth by asking undergraduate students how they were connected to
the earth. In the spirit of Wendell Berry (1977) who believed, “crucial to our history – hence, to our own minds – is the question of how we will relate to the land” (p. 7) and by asking students how they knew about land and the environment, Dr. Perkins was able to derive a sense of how young adults constructed their awareness of the environment. An overwhelming percentage of students consistently reported that their connection to the land, environment, earth, and gardens were grandparents. Grandparents who lived on small farms and grew tomatoes in the garden were cited as students’ connections to the land. Students willingly shared stories about summer stays with grandparents, but Dr. Perkins grew more worried. If grandparents, she argued, were undergraduate students’ link to the land, what would happen in one more generation? Would our link become severed? If the link was slowly growing more distant than our parents, or even ourselves, what would happen over time? While Dr. Perkins has yet to publish these findings, the question spurs a general, colloquial conversation about our perceptions of and connections to the land. This discussion topic has remained in my mind since 2005, and the underlying issue beneath our connection to the land is perhaps a personal impetus for this dissertation.

In a quest to understand why the world’s poorest populations starve in a time of plenty, Thurow & Kilman (2009) critically examined the role of the Food Aid industry, farm subsidies, ethanol incentives, western donors and policymakers, and activists in the complex web that has become a global food system. A critical approach of examining the top-down influence on our global food system complements a bottom-up approach of community organization for local food systems, which also illustrates Dewey’s (1927)
concept of community and state working together and enacting democracy. The organizationally complex intersection of policymakers, bureaucrats, governments, agri-businesses, food processing, marketing and packaging, and ultimate delivery to the dinner table is the nexus I choose to study, with family farmers as the primary focus. Given that family farmers are dwindling in numbers yet positioned in a place to increase local food sustainability, I find merit in exploring the smaller piece of the puzzle to understand how family farmers contribute to the larger overall system and how family farmers organize themselves as both a family and a site of work through organizational culture, socialization, and identification.

Farming in the United States today has become something of a heavily debated topic. Of the natural resources our nation is trying to sustainably produce, food and fuel are among the top two areas of production most troubling and posing the highest risk for national, social, and economic disaster (Schlosser, 2009). In a quest to understand the supposed food crisis our nation is experiencing, a thorough analysis of current and historical literature on the topic of food production, processing, and governmental involvement is necessary. A brief foray into an alternative farmer Joel Salatin’s (Pollan, 2006; Salatin, 2007) approach to sustainable farming will also be discussed and used as a model for potential future farming and production endeavors.

Interlinked is the organized system of alternative food production, which includes the organic food movement, the slow food movement, local food sustainability food movement, corn, farmer’s markets / co-ops and other community-based food initiatives. The economic status and class issue regarding access, government subsidies, CAFOs
(concentrated animal feeding operations), seasonal eating, and the local food movement all contribute to the social movement of environmental responsibility. What is the role of family farmers? How will change most likely happen, and what values influence those changes? Considering the rising demand for local food and rising national concern for environmental ethics and responsibility, what role does the family farm play, and how are these farmers affected? As a brief example, most conventional family farms currently receive financial subsidies from the government. However, those involved with environmental and economic sustainability efforts, including Salatin (2007), believe that if farming practices cannot happen without government grants, then those farming practices do not work. Reliance upon the government is but one of the many emerging paradoxes and tensions to be managed by family farmers.

This manuscript examines the differences and tensions farmers must negotiate in order to produce food or fiber. What might be certified organic does not necessarily mean environmentally sustainable, and vice versa. Several authors and public figures, such as Michael Pollan, are quickly catching the growing paradox of small, local operations who grow conventionally or cannot afford (or have no interest in) organic certification, versus organically produced food and fiber which has a large carbon footprint and ethical considerations.

Michael Pollan (2003, 2007, 2009) has become the leading expert critic in explaining to the masses what exactly the food crisis is. In his numerous tomes which lambast all parties involved in the food process, Pollan opens our eyes to the multi-
faceted nature of our food situation. Of all the foods produced and sold in grocery stores, nearly all of them have been helped by tall grass known as corn.

Corn, drawing attention in numerous documentaries and the focus of writers and lobbyists, is traced to nearly all products sold in the grocery stores. Sweeteners derived from corn including high fructose corn syrup, dextrose (also known as glucose), maltodextrin, fructose, mono- and di- saccharides, and sucrose, dominate the sweetening and preserving agents found in processed food (Corn Refiners Association, 2006). Food packaging is made out of corn-based products; even meat comes from corn-fed animals. Interestingly, even organic produce is traced back to corn (Pollan, 2006).

Though grain is not in the natural food chain for most animals (nor are eating other animals), grain is a major staple of animal’s diets today. In concentrated animal feeding operations, animals are most often fed grain, including corn. Organic does not mean that animals are fed in a natural setting, free to roam, or even that they live(d) on a diet of what was natural: grasses and pasture. Grain is easy to feed to animals to help them gain weight quickly, thereby speeding the time to harvest. While organic typically means that animals were not injected with growth hormones or antibiotics, organic does not always ensure sustainability or the absence of synthetics. For example, young chickens, often referred to as broilers, are raised (for their white breast meat) in confined cages. Chickens raised by industrial poultry corporation (which represent 98% of poultry sold in the U.S.) are de-beaked and have lost the ability to walk (Cummings, 2009; Kenner, 2008). Broilers sold in the grocery store today were most likely confined to a cage during their short life (Kenner, 2008). The poultry industry has manipulated the
anatomy of broilers so the white breast meat is larger than the legs can handle (Kenner, 2008). Some of these broilers may be raised and advertised as ‘organic’ but such slogans do not necessarily equate to a sustainable or ethical mode of production.

Most organic farming today is conducted on family farms (USDA NOP, 2010). One of the most prolific examples of sustainable family farming comes from the Salatin family in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia (Pollan, 2006). Sustainable living is the primary point for alternative family farmer Joel Salatin (2007). Alternative farming takes on many parallel qualities like those of alternative organizations. As Cheney (1995) stated, “alternative organizations define themselves at least somewhat in opposition to the 'mainstream' and are established and maintained with the principle of worker control as primary" (p. 171). Other perspectives of alternative organizations focus on the rejection of the dominant organizing patterns. For Lont (1988), alternative organizations are "formed in direct opposition to traditional profit-making business" (p. 233). For Salatin, his alternative approach to farming involves a unique mode of farming combining antiquated methods with modern inventions but without the use of chemicals and genetic modification. While not all produce and fiber raised on his 100-acre farm is certified organic, feed and supplies are purchased local and produce is sold only locally. For Salatin, the grand paradox of the current system is balancing governmental regulations and what he considers to be common-sense farming. For example, a tension exists between importing certified organic grain feed to acquire and keep organic certification, or, purchasing local grain feed grown conventionally which has a smaller carbon
footprint but forfeits organic licensure. This tension only grows as people learn more about the transport route from field to dinner plate.

Salatin first gained recognition through Michael Pollan’s bestseller *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006). Pollan, who was located in Berkeley, CA, phoned Salatin and asked him to ship a few broilers and steaks out to California from the Salatin’s family farm in Swoope, Virginia. Salatin refused. Pollan, assuming the problem was the shipping cost, gave Salatin his Fed-Ex account number. In a rather defining moment for the relationship Salatin and Pollan would later forge, Salatin refused to ship Pollan the meat out of principle of local sustainable agriculture.

To Salatin, shipping organic meat cross-country is far more environmentally damaging than growing grain conventionally with the use of chemicals and fertilizers. The fossil fuels used to transport animals to and from the farm to the abbatoir (slaughterhouse) to the processing plant and finally to the consumer create more of a carbon footprint that inevitably inflicts more damage to the environment than growing grain and selling locally albeit conventionally.

For Pollan and Salatin, much of the food crisis in this country stems from the observation that seasonal eating is no longer incorporated into our diet. Most folks expect to be able to buy blueberries and tomatoes year-round. Finding asparagus in the store in December is not all that uncommon, and strawberries are available nearly year-round. This has just recently become the status quo. Some crops, such as sweet corn on the cob, have a growing season that simply cannot be replicated elsewhere or in a laboratory. Due to the limited growing options, the harvest season of sweet corn is readily apparent in the
summertime based on the availability in grocery stores. Corn on the cob is one vegetable where availability and abundance still follows the natural harvest season. The average American is becoming more and more impatient with waiting for the desired food, thus we have a tremendous international export market for meat and produce. Fruit from Argentina might be organic, but is tainted with the carbon footprint of its travels. Likewise, tomatoes grown domestically are still picked before ripe and sprayed with chemicals to strategically facilitate the time of ripeness.

The growing debate over meat partially revolves around the exporting of young cows to China for growth and then importing the meat back into the United States. The implications for this are numerous and varied. The animals raised domestically are now raised in CAFOs, short for concentrated animal feeding operations. These feeding operations create locations of monocultures where only one type of animal is raised. Again, the problematic organic issue is that animals may be raised organically but live in a crowded dark feeding shed with 2,000 others of the same animal. Salatin has passionate opinions on the dangers and problems with such monocultures. In nature, many different animals (still considered biodiversity) provide a system of checks and balances. On Salatin’s farm, the cows are pastured and moved on a daily basis. The cows eat grass at a certain rate and create a certain amount of manure. The chickens are then released a few days after the cows have moved on, and the chickens multi-task: the hens eat the nutrient-rich fly larvae in the manure which creates tastier eggs but also prevents the flies from hatching. Flies spread disease and create problems so the chickens curtail this which reduces the need for chemicals to repeal bugs. The chickens return the favor to the land
through urea, chicken manure, which is nutrient-rich in nitrogen and acts as a natural fertilizer for the next crop of grasses. And so on goes the cycle of being a grass farmer, as Salatin calls himself.

The social movement of environmental responsibility has contributed to the political statement that farming has become. Many individuals prefer the thought of organic food, but organic does not necessarily mean environmentally friendly. Foods may initially be grown organically and sustainably, but once shipped across the world, the carbon footprint contributes to the environmental degradation. Environmental responsibility, like most other social movements, is fraught with complex tensions, double binds, and tensions.

Environmental Sustainability, Appalachia, and the Local Food Movement

Appalachia is a creature of the urban imagination. The folk culture, the depressed area, the romantic wilderness, the Appalachia of fiction, journalism, and public policy, have for more than a century been created, forgotten, and rediscovered, primarily by the economic opportunism, political creativity, or passing fancy of urban elites. The contemporary appearance of Appalachia, whether in movies about a coal miner’s daughter or in use of the rural themes in merchandising, draws on the imagery and motivations that a generation ago transfixed an affluent society and sent legions of poverty warriors into the hills. ...The making of Appalachia was a literary and a political invention rather than a geographical discovery. (Batteau, 1990, p. 1)
While the focal point of this dissertation is family farmers, the family farmers’ specific to regions of the southeastern Ohio Appalachian foothills are of primary interest. I find a noticeable absence of literature on farming in Appalachia, primarily because, intuitively, farming was engaged as a method of subsistence and survival, not as large-scale profit such as the farming of the central and Midwestern states. Whereas the topography of the central great plain states allows for massive agricultural production, the Appalachian hills and mountains limit the areas of flat acreage available for planting and grazing. Because of the smaller scale imposed, an absence of large machinery (and thus large agri-business) pervades the hilly terrain where small scale farming presides. The primary goal of farming in Appalachia is consumption and subsistence, not corporate profit, and this results in an area fertile for social movements such as the local food movement. As stated by Lanza Del Vasto, a western follower of Ghandi, “Find the shortest, simplest way between the earth, the hands and the mouth” (Klancher, 2003, p. 3). Appalachian farmers have the opportunity to contribute to a strong local food system.

Where the average community sources 5% of its food locally, food activists hope to increase local food consumption to 25%, which would decrease global food source dependency to 75% (Bosserman, 2009). While this may not seem astounding, the financial revenue that could remain in a local economy adds up over time. This community impact is worth increased attention (see Figure 1 for illustration) to maximize economic independence possibilities.
Figure 1. Local Food Systems Theoretical Framework by Percentage of Consumption (Bosserman, 2009)

Part of the appeal for studying farmers in the southeast Ohio region is the combination of local food movement, lack of large-scale agribusiness, blend of
conventional and organic farming, and the continual struggle for economic sustainability (Holley, 2009; Williams, 2002). Also, the borderland region of southeastern Ohio rests as a bridge between two possible cultures; many farmers have roots in Appalachian culture and rituals, yet proximity and locality make it possible to exit Appalachia (mentality and physicality) and thusly incorporate new innovations of diffusion (Rogers, 2003).

For a region struggling with education, safety, health care, and now even drinking water due to the mountain top removal, local farming and the “buy local” movement is an opportunity to establish security and retain economic and social resources in an attempt to ‘heal’ parts of Appalachia. From an organizational communication perspective, and for the purposes of this dissertation, family farms are at the heart of these efforts.

June Holley, a local Appalachian entrepreneur and founder of ACENet (Appalachian Center for Economic Networks), is at the forefront of the “Buy Local” movement for Appalachia. As a proponent for the progress of the local food systems campaign, she sees many advantageous benefits of studying the farmers in Ohio Appalachia in light of and as a model for the local food movement:

Many of the local farmers [in southeastern Ohio] are exploring a new (maybe actually old) form of farming that is becoming increasingly viable and an alternative model to conventional farming. Although all area farmers are not organic, because it costs too much to be certified, most practice organic tenets (no sprays or few), natural fertilizers, etc. either due to values or cost. All are building up the local BUY LOCAL economy. They market within the region (3 hours drive). That is the new breakthrough – buy local is growing faster than
organic. Its base customer wants a more sustainable economy, but others now buy
local because of flavor, coolness, etc… Athens area local food economy is
DEFINITELY on the cutting edge nationally… And farmers play a key role.
Studying local farmers gives a key into BIG shifts that are occurring in the food
economy nationally. AND these shifts have huge implications for other aspects of
culture and society – the social aspects of farmer’s markets or local restaurant are
HUGE networking hubs, cultural shifts in values, etc. (p. 1, original emphasis)

With the increasing attention on the local foods movement, the farmers in
Appalachia are in a unique position to make strides in the social movement of our food
security issues, but also to financially benefit from their heritage of farming.

One proposed solution to getting local food direct to consumers lies within
farmers’ markets. The name itself of farmer’s markets is arguable. The placement of the
apostrophe in farmer’s markets denotes an ownership on the farmer’s behalf; there is an
assumption that goods sold at the market come from farmers (Fitts, 2009). The growing
debate at farmer’s markets is that artisans and crafts people might gather produce to make
a value-added product. However, there is an implicit message to customers that the food
used to make the products comes from farmers (Fitts, 2009). The reality of many farmer’s
markets is that regular townspeople go to Wal-Mart or the grocery store to purchase
produce to make salsa. Essentially, nothing has been grown locally. The only local
element is the area of adding value to the produce.

Farmers markets without an apostrophe denote that the vendors selling produce
are farmers who grew the food themselves. A growing internal debate at markets
internally concerns who is invited and allowed to sell at farmer’s markets. Crafts people are sometimes welcome, sometimes not. The general requirement for most markets is that you should grow what you’re selling. However, bakery vendors likely did not mill their own flour to make pies or grow their own apples. Most farmers markets do not have strict regulation which is a direct result of already trying to escape governmental regulations. One problematic area of markets is that the vendors are not required to be transparent about the derivation of items sold. For the purposes of this paper, farmer’s markets with an apostrophe will be used to signify that farmers are the dominant owner of community farmer’s markets.

The quest to bring food more directly from the farmer to consumer can be achieved through farmer’s markets. Community food initiatives are frequently linked to local markets, and it is the community-based food collectives that engage in activism for local and fresh food. Community gardening, urban gardens, seasonal produce, identifying most sustainable growing practices by region, and trying to make fresh food affordable are just some of the objectives of community food initiative groups.

Family farms play an integral role in farmer’s markets. A large emphasis in the local food movement and slow food movement is an increased focus on acquiring food locally. In order to do this, food must be grown locally, food typically grown by family farmers. Family farmers, operationally defined here by at least two related family members working on the farm, were and arguably still are the main pillar of the local food economy.
Supporting the local food economy brings various benefits to communities. Aside from the infusion and retaining of money, the food sold and consumed usually has a smaller carbon footprint. Local farmers bring the option for consumers to get an increasingly transparent view of where their food comes from. On farms such as Joel Salatin’s, customers submit orders for chickens a week in advance. On Wednesday mornings, customers arrive to bag their own chicken approximately one hour after the birds were slaughtered. Due to governmental regulations, Salatin is not qualified to grow, slaughter, process, and package the food on the site of his farm. He is allowed to grow, slaughter, and process, but not package; his solution to this bureaucratic tape is to have customers bag their own freshly killed & plucked chickens. In so doing, customers have the option to arrive a few minutes early to watch their bird go through the preparation stages. When the birds are ready, customers get bags provided by Polyface (the name of Salatin’s farm) and bag their own poultry. This hands-on approach might not be favored by all consumers, but the option provided to community members is an incredible addition to available food choices.

Local growers also promote seasonal eating. Society has reached a point of immediate demand and access with regards to foods. Encouraging society to get back to eating seasonally ripe food could contribute to reducing the carbon footprint of the food industry, and this is one of the primary arguments put forth by the slow food movement (Petrini, 2007).

Growing concern and public attention surrounding farmer’s markets and organic farming involves the absence of government licensure regarding food safety and
production standards; this has been addressed by the creation of the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009. Introduced in February 2009, this proposed legislation will greatly increase the regulations for farms that grow and process their goods for sale to customers at farmer’s markets and local restaurants. As of March 2010, the proposal has reached the Senate floor with much protest from local food activists. The Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009 states that the purpose is, “To establish the Food Safety Administration within the Department of Health and Human Services to protect the public health by preventing food-borne illness, ensuring the safety of food, improving research on contaminants leading to food-borne illness, and improving security of food from intentional contamination, and for other purposes” (HR 875, 2009). While some perceive the act to protect citizens from harmful goods, others view it as an attempt to criminalize organic farming and drive farmer’s markets to extinction (Lance, 2009). As much as one third of Salatin’s (2006) time is spent dealing with bureaucratic policies that continue to interfere with work on his farm. Salatin would be considered a staunch protester to the Food Safety Modernization act of 2009, along with nearly all of farmer’s markets supporters and small organic farm supporters.

Wendell Berry (1977) anticipated the virtual elimination of small, local produce while also recognizing the encroachment of regulation and chemicals:

And nowhere now is there a market for minor produce: a bucket of cream, a hen, a few dozen eggs. One cannot sell milk from a few cows anymore; the law-required equipment is too expensive. Those markets were done away with in the name of sanitation – but, of course, to the enrichment of the large producers. We
have always had to have “a good reason” for doing away with small operators, and in modern times the good reason has often been sanitation, for which there is apparently no small or cheap technology. Future historians will no doubt remark upon the inevitable association, with us, between sanitation and filthy lucre. And it is one of the miracles of science and hygiene that the germs that used to be in our food have been replaced by poisons. (p. 41)

Despite governmental influence and attempts at regulation along with various social movement campaigns, the issue of the food situation in our nation (including dependence on other countries for supply, carbon pollution of production, and health linkages to what we eat) is a serious and heated debate. The ultimate goal of the slow food movement is to find ways to sustainably and fairly produce food; the goal of the local food movement is to find ways to support communities and cooperatives to become independent of global food agri-businesses, the organics movement strives to produce food without the use of chemicals; the government strives to keep food growth and production safe for consumers. In order to achieve these goals, among others, farmers begin from their own personal paradigm, yet negotiating the current farming practices and industries is fraught with moral and ethical choices. At the heart of the history of farming lies family farmers, and this manuscript aims to understand more about the tensions, paradoxes, and values that drive farming families’ growing practices and choices.

From a theoretical and philosophical position, Dewey (1927) offers a framework to examine the aforementioned situation in our country. Through examining the role and
formation of the state, public, and community, the issues are examined from an interpretive perspective. The theoretical grounding of Dewey (1927) in regards to the social movements regarding food and farming will be further explored in Chapter Two.

I currently stand at the intersection of multiple frameworks, paradigms, disciplines, and values. Farmers in the Midwest, such as my father, defend conventional farming and maintain that without conventional farming practices, the world would starve. Contenders of that mindset, such as Thurow and Kilman (2009) want to know why, even with conventional farming practices, do thousands of people die every day from hunger, malnutrition, and related diseases. The local food movement is gaining speed, perhaps more than the organics movement. However, as stated by Rauber (2009), the “food miles” travelled by food and fiber (colloquially called “from womb-to-tomb”) only accounts for 11% of the greenhouse-gas emissions (p. 21). Rauber (2009) explained that while there are many fine reasons to seek out local food, the majority of food’s carbon footprint comes from the food production especially of red meat. On the other hand, farmers like Salatin (2007) strive to pasture beef and pork so as to let a pig fully express the “pigness” of its existence; these farmers contend that the growing practices of raising meat are the issue, not the mere fact of raising animals alone. Enter the discussion of locavores, pasture-fed, free-range, concentrated animal feeding operations, corn, organic, sustainably-grown, fair-trade, Monsanto, genetic modification, local food systems, global food systems, carbon footprint, food miles: family farmers have some inescapable choices to make when it comes to their farming practices.
I begin this journey by asking questions such as: What is the relationship between family farmers and their connection to the land? What role do family farmers adopt within the environmental sustainability movement? How do family farmers view their relationships with forces that regulate farming? How does Dewey’s (1927) work allow us to make sense of the individual role of family farmers in a larger public? How do farmers negotiate the numerous farming paradigms and values with their current growing practices? Examining the family farm as the site of work and production simultaneously places the family as a working organization. To understand more about the organizing practices of food production, examining the intersecting and inter-dependent cultures and organizational identification of farming can illuminate the current situation of many family farmers, particularly in the Ohio Appalachian region.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The farming culture is both dominant and strong, yet much of the literature exploring organizational culture does not lend itself to understanding the unique settings of family farms. Due to the informal organizational network of family farmers, typical organizational culture frameworks are not as applicable as they are to corporations, non-profit operations, government bureaucracies, or other entities with defined boundaries. In this light, I posit that a strong culture exists among family farmers, and in this literature review I argue that family farms are considered an organization, albeit a non-traditional or alternative entity which does not fit within the classic process-oriented framework of organizational culture (e.g., Hofstede, Neuijen, Daval Ohayv, & Geert Sanders, 1990).

Exploring farming families from an interpretive organizational communication perspective allows for the inclusion of multiple truths. From a pragmatists’ perspective, the experiences of several farmers will all be varied; James (1907) argued that an individual’s experiences created their ‘true’ reality. As truth and reality are constructed (James, 1907; Mead, 1963), so is society (Dewey, 1927). Although not all realities are equal (because some have more purchase than others), pragmatism allows for the inclusion of multiple realities based on experience. These multiple realities contribute to a larger civil society created and maintained through communication (Dewey, 1927). As individual organizations, farming families directly contribute to the construction of a civil society. Exploring the motives and cultures behind the families’ decisions can provide insight to their understanding of environmental and farming issues. Additionally, the
ways in which these messages and ideas are communicated further contributes to the construction of their reality, and thus, civil society.

The following literature review examines the relationships between organizational communication, family communication, social movements, environmental communication, and pragmatism. Organizational culture, identity, advocacy, and interpretive organizational communication will be the lens used to examine the organizing practices used by the Appalachian farming families. The social movement regarding food production will also be discussed through the lens of environmental justice, voice and privilege during social movements, and social movement rhetoric. Family farming and environmental communication will be discussed throughout this manuscript, but it is important to begin with the understanding that family farms are complex organizations due to their positioning in the nexus of public and private. A diverse array of theories may be necessary to fully explore the values of family farms.

Examining the dominant cultural values of a population or organization paired with studying countercultures can create a lens for viewing social change from an organizational culture perspective. Social change from an organizational perspective involves differentiating organizations and organizing (Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2006):

An organization is composed of a group of individuals who engage in interdependent cooperative actions. Organizational members take inputs (materials, energy, and information) from the environment, process them, and return them to the environment as outputs. …However, the term organization is used in a static fixed sense without taking time into account. Organizing, on the
other hand, refers to the process-oriented, time-varying nature of the behaviors of members in an organization. …In essence, an organization results from the results of organizing. (pp. 36-37)

The culture developed through the communication process among connected individuals is frequently referred to as organizational culture (Jablin, 1990). While examining the cultures within contained units generates increased knowledge about these cultures, it does not generally allow for understanding ways in which work life culture is experienced, created, and maintained through communication when the work place is something other than an organized and well-defined locale.

Traditional organizational culture, examined through the scope of a specific industry or organization, is helpful for examining ways in which a specific group of connected individuals interpret and act upon their environment through a set of shared meanings (Schein, 1984). In conventional organizational culture models (e.g., Schein, 1984), the variable analytic container approach to studying organizations is apparent. In Schein’s (1984) model, I tackle two variables that speak directly to the container view in which many scholars approach organizational culture. Specifically, “problems of external adaptation and internal integration” and “taught to new members” are two facets of the model that make it operationally problematic when applying organizational culture constructs to an non-uniform entity such as family farmers (Schein, 1984, pp. 9-10).

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has been difficult to operationally define across organizations and disciplines. For some scholars and applications, organizational culture
is defined as the communication practices which translate the values, mission, and attitudes of the organization (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Schein, 1991). Early scholars examined organizational culture from a systems perspective (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Some studies take the interpretive perspective that organizations are viewed as cultures and that culture is communication, and not as stable, bounded entity (Putnam, 1983; Sypher, Applegate & Sypher, 1985). Pacanowsky and Trujillo (1983) extend the interpretive notion into a dramatistic perspective that views organizational culture as a performance of constructed realities.

For the purposes of this study, communication will be the foci of culture development, and this study will be conducted from an interpretive approach toward organizational communication and culture. Communication being constitutive of culture to the point of inseparability is inherently the approach to understanding how cultures in and among organizations are created and maintained (Deetz, 1982; Eisenberg & Riley, 2001; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1990).

My approach to studying the culture of any organization relies heavily on works from interpretive scholars examining the topic. Organizational culture can be defined by the shared subjective network of meanings made possible to members (Smircich, 1981), although many definitions and interpretations of organizational culture exist, which will be discussed at a later point in this manuscript. The route to accessing organizational culture is through studying the communication that takes place between and among organizational members.
According to Putnam (1983), an interpretive perspective on organizational communication “centers on the study of meanings, that is, the way individuals make sense of their world through their communicative behaviors. … Interpretation assumes a broader referent than simply integrating data with conclusions; it refers to the sources, nature, and methodology for investigating organizational life” (p. 31). Studying the organizational culture of family farmers from an interpretive perspective is to focus on the meanings and ways individuals make sense of the cultural values that are shared through communication.

Much of what fuels my interpretive approach to studying organizations as cultures comes from my theoretical stance on symbolic interaction (Mead, 1963) and social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1989). Like Mead (1963), I follow that individuals are products of communication, but I also contend that we are both purposive and creative in our reality of our selves. Interpretive scholars follow that the words and symbols we use as well as the behaviors of each other is where and how our reality becomes socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1989). Interpretive research examines the meanings linked to the words and symbols we use as well as the interactions that transpire which create and alter these meanings (Ritzer, 1975).

An interpretive approach to organizational culture is unique for many reasons. Specifically, interpretive approaches to organizational culture examine reification of structures and voluntarism (Putnam, 1983). First, reification of structures is “the act of transforming abstract, symbolic forms into concrete empirical facts” (Swenson, 1982, p. 380). Interpretivists approach these structures “as sets of complex, semiautonomous
relationships that originate from human interactions (Putnam, 1983). Unlike functionalists, interpretivists give heed to the creation of structures and do not treat organizations as containers or entities (Zey-Ferrell & Aiken, 1981).

Second, interpretive scholars approach the construction of reality from the perspective that individuals have the ability and autonomy to create their own reality; functionalists perceive individuals merely as products of their environment (Putnam, 1983). Playing an active role in one’s reality and making sense of those interactions is at the heart of Mead’s (1963) perspective on symbolic interactionism. According to Putnam (1983), “interpretivists believe that individuals create their own environments. They act and interpret their interactions with a sense of free will and choice; thus they have a critical role in shaping environmental and organizational realities” (p. 36). Approaching organizational communication studies from an interpretive perspective better equips scholars to focus on the communication processes in organizations. Putnam (1983) stated, “by treating organizations as the social construction of reality, organizing becomes a process of communicating” (p. 53).

Although interpretive scholars focus on the social construction of individuals’ realities, the interpretive approach is divided into the naturalistic and critical research traditions; “the naturalistic schools aim to generate insights, to explain events, and to seek understanding. Critical schools, in contrast, aim to free individuals from sources of domination and repression” (Putnam, 1983, p. 47). Although power and the prevalence of dominant institutional norms may be called into question throughout this study, an interpretive approach from a naturalistic tradition guides this research.
To study organizational communication from a naturalistic interpretive approach, an examination of themes, symbols, and communication is of direct interest (Smircich, 1981). These themes and communication practices “show the ways the symbols are linked into meaningful relationships… they specify the links between values, beliefs, and actions (Smircich, 1981, p. 7). As explained by Putnam (1983), “interpretive approaches aim to explicate and, in some cases, to critique the subjective and consensual meanings that constitute social reality” (p. 32). The meanings of behaviors and social action lie within the organizational members’ sharing of those meanings, subjective as they may be. The social action of or carrying out of these shared meanings through communication is the site of studying organizational culture (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982).

Examining the communication practices and themes to better understand the values, beliefs, and actions of a connect group of people is a proficient approach to studying organizational culture, especially when the values of a specific culture are one of the strongest binding forces, such as with Appalachia (Williams, 2002). But in order to learn more about a strong and unique culture with its own value system, such as farming, it is beneficial to first examine the parameters of counterculture. A counterculture, as defined by Trice and Beyer (1993) is “a subculture whose basic understandings question and oppose the overall culture in some way” (p. 244). If a counterculture questions or opposes the dominant culture in some way, it is necessary to identify both the dominant culture and then the counterculture.

In the 1973 film “Diet for a small planet,” non-traditional eater and author Frances Moore Lappe set out to explain why Americans were (foolishly) eating so much
meat. In the early 1970s, this was indeed a way of thinking that was counter to current
dominant Western family meal plans, which had been incorporating more and more meat
than in centuries past (Bluejay, 1998). Lappe (1973) explained the molecular makeup of
proteins and amino acids through an attempt to convince the public that eating red meat
was not the only, nor the best, way to meet the dietary standards of the 8 essential amino
acids our bodies need (Lappe, 1973). When non-meat eating individuals spoke out
against eating meat and living a vegetarian lifestyle, the public met the vegetarians with
disregard and viewed vegetarians as a fringe population (Bluejay, 1998). What began as a
counterculture (Trice & Beyer, 1993) has now emerged into an acceptable way of life, as
even most restaurants and eating establishments offer vegetarian meal options. The
incorporation of non-meat meal options, which was unheard of not that long ago, is an
example of how a counterculture can become mainstream (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Once the distinction (and relationship) between organizations and organizing is
understood, it is easier to see how the loose connections of organizing do not always
equate to a defined, contained organization. For example, the environmental
responsibility movement, the largest movement in the world according to Hawken
(2007), is a movement composed of individuals working in response to the environmental
impact of the current way of human life. While the separate groups of individuals may
not directly work together in a defined setting or with defined spatial boundaries, the
process-orientation and time-varying nature of different groups’ work is, according to
Papa, et al. (2006), an organization.
Through examining the social movement of environmental responsibility, I argue that one organizing body is comprised of the farming families in rural Appalachia in southeastern Ohio. As a group of farmers concerned with finding ways to create a sustainable way of life (OhioFoodshed, 2009), together they comprise an organizing body in the social change movement. While the cause is arguably noble and not without resistance, the organizing body of farmers can be considered agitators to the dominant technological paradigm of national conventional farming practices.

Defining culture is an important step when studying the culture of organizations. For Smircich (1985), culture is “a focus on culture helps us focus on the assumptions that drive the way things are done in organizations” (p. 59). This definition draws attention to the result of the culture, or looking at the motives that drive the process in an organization. For Sathe (1983), “culture is a set of important assumptions (often unstated) that members of a community share” (p. 6). This definition rests with the perspectives and assumptions of an organization or community, but does not address if these assumptions dictate members’ social action or process of interaction. According to Morgan (1986), culture “shapes the character of an organization” (p. 117). As posited by Deal and Kennedy (1982), culture is the way things get done in the organization. This definition examines action and process but does not include motives, assumptions, values, or beliefs. Pettigrew (1979) stated, “Culture consists of the publicly and privately accepted meanings of a given group that serve to define their understanding of reality (p. 572). Pettigrew (1979) recognizes the connection between meanings and reality, but many scholars, including Berger and Luckman (1989), would agree that individuals’
realities and experiences are never identical. Two people in similar relations to the world still have very different experiences and do not necessarily share an understanding of reality simply due to publicly or privately accepted meanings, even though many communication scholars believe that our reality is understood and confirmed through our conversation and discussion with others (Berger & Luckman, 1989).

The operational definition of culture that this manuscript adopts is put forth by Schein (1985), “culture is a basic pattern of assumptions… that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 9). When discussing an environmentally responsible social movement, the collection of individuals working toward similar goals comprises the organization. The basic pattern of assumptions (Schein, 1985) of what environmentally responsible actions include teaches members how to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those issues, and this process of culture ends with the results of environmentally responsible actions.

The organizational culture work put forth by Geertz (1973) and Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982, 1983) has been most influential in building the current understanding of organizational culture.

Geertz (1973) presented culture as a controlling mechanism (plans, rules, programs) for the governance of behavior. For Geertz, cultural patterns – “organized systems of significant symbols” (p. 46) – are what keep human behavior from being simply chaotic acts, devoid of shape or meaning. Culture is
the condition of human experience. Thus, cultural patterns guide the development of the human. (Pepper, 1995, p. 35)

Organizational culture applies to farming families in numerous ways, but the context particularly compelling in a study of organizational culture of a family farm is to look at what values drive farming practices, where those values come from, what the values from the ambiguous environmental sustainability movement mean to a family farm, and what type of paradoxes or double binds emerge. Intersecting cultures, such as that of the larger bureaucratic institution regulating food production, the family farm, Appalachia Ohio culture, and the local sustainability movement can result in an interesting negotiation of cultural values on behalf of each farming family. Understanding organizational culture is an avenue to understanding how families who farm as organizations make sense out of an ever-increasingly complex world. One way to understand more about cultural values is to explore how individuals identify with organizations and movements. Studying organizational identification aids us in understanding more about how cultural values are adopted and reproduced through organizational members.

Organizational Identification

For the farmers and farming families in rural Appalachia, the concept of identity is one rarely discussed but implicitly understood. In an area that follows the culture of honor (Campbell, 1966), the legacy remaining in today’s society is rooted in decades of tradition. The farmers who sell at the farmer’s markets share, to some extent, a cultural heritage communicated to them by generations past. The culture of honor (Campbell,
1966) operates on the assumption that certain regions are more reliant on the cooperation of others in the community for survival than other regions that can afford individuality and autonomy. If neighbors cannot be trusted or relied upon to a certain extent, families live in a virtual state of war (Hobbes, 1928). To avoid that state of nature or state of war, families cooperate through various channels to stay safe and prosperous. In the Appalachian region, farmers have the option to cooperate in several ways including through farmer’s markets and cooperative systems to strengthen the ties in their network. What has resulted from a long line of farming families is the infrastructure to assist farmers to grow their goods and sell to the public.

Studying the identity of farmers can lend insight to understanding how they align themselves with or distance themselves from external organizations or networks. Farming, a notoriously autonomous profession, is strongly aided by both social and professional networks. The survival of a farm, no matter the size, is dependent on the past, present, and future. The identity of farmers is connected to their family lineage and future succession in addition to being connected to the outside community. Appalachia is no exception to the rule; if anything, Appalachian family farmers are even more dependent on outside networks and the assurance due to the remote location and economic situation of historical poverty.

Social identity theory (SIT) and organizational communication dovetail well and can be applied when attempting to gain understanding about the identity of farmers who live in the inherited grips of culture as well as the chosen profession of agriculture. Social
identity theory parallels with organizational communication studies in several ways. According to Scott (2007),

Social identities are those aspects of an individual’s self derived from the social categories to which one belongs. These social categories help to define the individual and others based on membership in certain group (ingroups) and nonmembership in others (outgroups). …One’s organizational membership creates a very important social identity for many individuals. Organizational identification is thus a specific form of social identification where we refer to the self in terms of our organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Using social identity theory in the context of agrarian families is applicable due to the totalizing nature of farming. A farmer’s office is his (or her) field, which is his (or her) workplace, which is usually also his (or her) home. Self-identifying as a farmer alludes to the social identity of a stereotypical farmer. The organizational membership of farming, however, does not exist within the confines of a certain corporation but rather in a social institution steeped in heritage, family, and history.

Three applications of organizational identity will be explored in this dissertation. First, the organizational identity of farm families can be understood through organizational identification literature in the communication discipline. Studying a farm family’s organizational culture and organizational identification is another avenue toward understanding more about the cultural values of family farmers. Recognizing the organizational identification that corporations try to adopt when it comes to “farm fresh”
food sources is an example of organizations wanting to put forth the mythic, cultural goodness that comes from the idealized farm (Rushing, 1983). Coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, “green washing” is a corporate strategy to appear conscious of environmental impacts of their practices, such as the daily washing of guest towels at hotels, but asking guests to re-use towels actually saves the hotel money; their efforts are not entirely altruistic but instead directly impact the company’s bottom line (Hayward, 2009). Likewise, many grocery stores give illusions of having a close connection to farms. ‘Farm fresh’ advertises a carton of eggs which depicts a sunrise over a pasture with a white fence in the foreground. This attempt to instill and maintain the connection of our food with farms is one way large corporations invoke organizational identification to their benefit.

Third, learning more about the ways people connect to an organization is at the heart of identification, but there is merit in looking closely at identification as a way to understand more about social movements and identification. Clearly, the tensions and paradoxes farming families face today demand that farmers make decisions about which organizations they will be connected to; if a farmer chooses to practice conventional, chemical-based, genetically modified seed farming practices, the farmer is nearly forced to identify with a Monsanto-driven, big agri-business (and nearly anti-organic) paradigm. The reverse is farming in a more ecologically-friendly way, perhaps organic, perhaps supporting local food systems, but this connection to an organization through farming practices introduces the role individuals play in social movements.
As described by Cheney (1983), identification is “an active process by which individual link themselves to elements in the social scene” (p. 342). These identifications link us to organizations and social movements; these identifications allow us to persuade and to be persuaded, and identifications help us with sense-making (Cheney, 1983).

Christensen and Cheney (1994) recognize that organizations and corporations strategically try to project certain identities to the public, such as with the example of corporations trying to project certain identities (supporting farms) by the images they display (sunrise over pasture images on egg carton).

A by-product of organizational identification is the potential dichotomy between the outward display and others’ interpretations of organizational identity, and one’s own view of their own identification. As Cheney and Tompkins (1987) asserted,

There is, quite naturally, an ongoing dialectical tension between “one’s” own expression of identity and others’ interpretation of it, a tension which is managed on a continual basis primarily through the definitional power of language.

Identification, then, is a process closely tied to identity, both linguistically and conceptually. Identification will be broadly conceived by us as the appropriation of identity, either (1) by the individual or collective in question or (2) by others. (The term “appropriation” is appropriate here because it subsumes both “something acquired” and “something invested.”) Identification includes the development and maintenance of an individuals’ or a group’s “sameness” or “substance” against a backdrop of change and “outside” elements. Identification also includes the development and maintenance of symbolic linkages salient for
the individual/group, as well as less significant attachments which may be promoted by an rhetor. By “stopping” a process for purposes of “seeing” or describing, we create a state or product: in this sense, identification may be thought to have cognitive, affective and intentional components. All of these, of course, are commonly expressed through language (and to a lesser degree by nonverbal means), and this is our focal concern. Finally, the “self” is seen here as “an inductive generalization” made about an individual, either by that individual or by others. (p. 5)

While the research on organizational identification slowed down considerably after heavy critiques of Cheney’s (1983a) organizational identification questionnaire (Schrodt, 2002), I believe organizational identification studies continue to offer insight to the organizational communication discipline.

*Rise of Family Farm*

While agriculture is a foundational stone of the United States, and most agriculture production started with small farming families, there remains little research on the experiences and lives of these families. Today, much of the country’s crop production is maintained by large farming corporations, sometimes referred to as agribusinesses. Countless family farms sell out each year to farming corporations, which makes it harder and harder for smaller family farms to survive. Nonetheless, an understanding of the nation’s rise and fall of family farms is crucial to examining the current state of food-related environmental sustainability issues. This section begins with an attempt to
examine the rise and fall of the family farm, the role of technology in farming, and the changing role of women in farming.

The agricultural practices of many families in the nineteenth century have created a basis and foundation for what has become a cornerstone of American Midwest culture. Farming to survive was the initial goal of families in the mid 1800s. Family members worked on a farm with the sole goal of growing and producing enough food to nourish the family. Multiple generations worked and often lived together and the survival of the farm was dependent on the continuation of generations.

The first major farming shift in America happened in the late nineteenth century. Around 1890 until 1930, farmers began producing crops in additional to their survival to sell to other families who choose to move off the farm and to an urban area. The introduction of automobiles and tractors dramatically changed the farming life and culture, and made the acquisition of consumer goods a reality through which farmers both sold and purchased. The increased demand for crops and produce created a boom for families who farmed enough surpluses to sell at market, and this progressed until the Great Depression.

The economic boom between 1890 and 1930 became known as the golden age of agriculture. Agricultural prosperity for families in the early twentieth century was identified by “prosperity, stability, and peace in America’s rural communities, especially those in the Midwestern states, untroubled by either the turbulent race relations and poverty of the rural South or the labor unrest of urban, industrial America” (Neth, 1995, p. 4). What followed the 1930s is considered an agricultural crisis, which is economically
identified again in the 1980s. The primary fall of family farms can be attributed to the shift away from agrarianism toward the industrialization of agriculture (Neth, 1995).

Farming in the United States has a turbulent yet constant history. Famines, floods, droughts, natural disasters, storms, depressions, and crises of all kinds mar the history of a nation whose output feeds many parts of the world. As the largest exporter of corn, the United States farming industry has seen severe highs and lows. As technology and industrialization slowly impacted the production of agriculture, small families who completed the work by hand became more and more obsolete as (expensive) machinery replaced (wo)manual labor.

Understanding the historical rise and economic impact of family farms can be done through looking at gender, family, and community (Neth, 1995). Beginning a discussion of family farming and not including the larger community surrounding individual families and their farms would be impossible. There is a permeating myth about the iconic individual male farmer being solely independent, and an absence of attention to the interconnectedness of social and economic ties as well as family, neighborhood, and work. As explained by Neth (1995):

The family farm” suggests a unified interest, the family, which operates in an isolated environment, the farm. But, in fact, the individualistic farmer is dependent on women and children, and the family is a relational institution whose members do not always have identical interests. The family farm was not isolated, but part of a web of community ties that connected farms and families in rural neighborhoods. Farm people understood their lives through these social
relationships, created by social interaction and by the labor that dominated their lives – farming. (p. 2)

Farming is very much based on the involvement of the entire family and surrounding community. The phrasing of “the family farm” implies the involvement of all members of the family being part of a visual location with boundaries.

*Fall of Farm: 1920s, 1930s, 1980s*

Today’s farming status in the United States is directly and irrevocably linked to the farming crisis of the 1980s, which to date is the worst economic disaster to strike rural America since the Great Depression (Barnett, 2000). As explained by Manning (2009), the farming crisis resulted from a combination of economic and political factors:

In the early 1970s, lowered trade barriers coupled with record Soviet purchases of American grain resulted in a sharp increase in agricultural exports. Farm incomes and commodity prices soared. The removal of restrictions on Federal Land Bank lending, coupled with increased lending by other entities for farmland purchases in the Seventies, led to rising land values. Conveniently low interest rates persuaded many farmers -- and would-be farmers -- to go deeply into debt on the assumption that commodity prices and land values would continue to rise. Farm household income had been below the national average in the 1960s; in the next decade it was higher than the national average for every year except one. But it would return to the 1960s levels in the Eighties. The agricultural "boom" didn't last long. (p. 1)
The boom and bust of farming in the 1970s and 1980s, while attributed to many factors, is easy seen through the economic policies set forth by the government. According to Barnett (2000), “the integration of the U.S. agricultural sector into larger national and global economic systems and this sector's subsequent vulnerability to outside economic and political influences” is the main culprit of the farming crisis of the 1980s (p. 366). Inflation, global exporting, presidential administrations, value of the American dollar, land values, farmers’ massive debt incurred due to quick expansion (which was encouraged by the government), and the status of contemporary economic theory are some of the other contributing factors that led to a crisis that was not easily forecasted by economists, scholars, and agricultural advisors (Barnett, 2000).

During the 1980s, thousands of farmers lost their farms and even homes due to encroaching capitalism (Dudley, 2002). The crisis instigated a competition for land, pitting farmers against each other in what can only be considered a social and moral tragedy from a community standpoint (Dudley, 2002). The farm crisis further damaged families who lost their farms through compromised mental health and the cultural and social meaning of debt and farm loss. Rates of abuse, alcoholism, murder, divorce, and suicide soared as that status of mental health among Midwest farmers declined (Ortega, Johnson, Beeson & Craft, 1994). The severe psychological effects of the crisis came to the media forefront, and as a result, interest in the mental health of rural communities grew (Ortega, et al., 1994).

For the farming families able and determined to retain their farm, women played an integral role in the survival of the farm through income from outside the house and
off-farm jobs (Barlett, 1993; Jellison, 1993). If a family lost their farm, the farm was
most often replaced by farm consolidations, moving farming from an agrarian to
industrial position (Barlett, 1993).

Technology undisputedly played an active role in the industrialization of
agriculture. The shift from family income disbursed among family members follows the
model of agrarianism; wage laborers moving onto sharecropper farms signified
agriculture’s industrialization (Headlee, 1991). As with the introduction of technology
into a production-based economy, the combustible engine allowed tractors and combines
to replace horse-drawn implements. This allowed for less time to complete work, which
in turn increased the demand for more land to cultivate. An industrial competition was
also waged against farmers as to who could afford or had the collateral for expensive
farming equipment. Throughout all of this, we see the family’s role in farming start to
become compromised.

When studying the historical context of farming in the United States in the past
100 years, little research includes the voice of the farm wife. Masculine work has
dominated farming research. Dating back to indigenous populations around the globe,
very few self-sufficient cultures privilege women’s work and responsibilities over men’s
work. In a masculine culture such as America, the status of men’s and women’s
responsibilities ranks differently through that of social importance, yet the contributions
of women were and are vital to the success of a farm.

Few scholars have studied agribusiness from a gendered perspective, and Neth
(1995) wrote to uncover the histories of rural and farm women during a pivotal time
period in American history, 1900-1940. Women’s responsibilities typically revolved around work in the house and light manual labor, such as planting and tending gardens. However, it is widely known that women have stepped into predominantly men’s roles when needed, and it is no different in a farming family. (Despite the experiences of my father encouraging my involvement in domestic tasks, it was my mother who planted corn and sewed wheat in the field. My mother drove grain trucks from the fields to the grain elevator, expertly handling the gears of a 14-ton truck.)

Examining the gendered experience of life in a farming family can provide a different perspective on our understanding of the rise and fall of family farming. The introduction of industrialization and technology changed many dynamics of family farm life, especially for women. Jellison (1993) argued that the introduction of technology did not reduce the amount of work women had to do. As technology moved onto the farm and into the house, women were seen primarily as the domestic manager, not as a farmer. As Jellison (1993) explained, many women tenaciously battled the domestic ideology and instead used the time freed by in-home technology to spend more time in the farming operation. Essentially, if anything, technology threatened to make women less productive in the fields and farm lands, further dividing work by gender. While women were and in most cases still are considered the homemaker, farm women have always been both producer and homemaker (Jellison, 1993).

Even before the economic depression of the 1920s to 1940s, women were involved in networks with other farming women, such as the home extension networks. Walker (2002) described home extension networks organized through governmental farm
bureau services as coping methods for women involved with farming life. Women also initiated commercial endeavors by using farm resources, such as the production of fruit goods and dairying, which increased women’s contributions both on and off the farm. The entrepreneurial endeavors of farming women were done so with limited resources in attempts to adapt to the changing economic and political climates (Walker, 2002). This further illustrates women’s less noticed and even oftentimes unseen contributions to the family farm.

Family Communication and Agriculture

The central element to a family farm is the family. In this dissertation, I define a family farm as two connected people (either by birth, marriage, or choice) who join forces by living together and working the same piece(s) of land for the same outcome. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services (2002) claims there is no generally accepted definition of “family farm” and that a variety of acceptable definitions exist; but a general consensus used by Congress and other state researching institutes is that the presence of a corporation, cooperatives, estates, trusts, and hired managers is considered a nonfamily farm. The organizing element of the farm in connection to other forces is the foci of my dissertation, but the family communication element of family farming (such as intergenerational communication, conflict in families, and estate planning) plays a dominant role in family farming, and will be addressed here.

The family farm is a prime location to apply current concepts of studies in family communication, although most family communication studies have examined families from within families, not in application to an external entity, such as farming. I hope to
incorporate family communication in a way that informs the family communication literature by applying family communication literature to an external situation, such as farm families negotiating the competing, colliding, and conflicting cultural values in farming practice decisions.

Few family communication studies exist concerning family farmers; of the studies conducted by communication scholars, the focus has been internal family communication, such as family conflict and family stress (Weigel & Weigel, 1990), family decision making (Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1989), farm succession planning (Keating & Munro, 1989; Pitts, Fowler, Kaplan, Nussbaum & Becker, 2009), family integration of in-laws (Marotz-Baden & Mattheis, 1994) and inter-generational communication (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1991), and communication satisfaction (McGonigal, 1991). Harter (2004) examined the contradictions and tensions among members of farming cooperatives, several studies have focused on the mythic qualities and representations of American farmers (see Peterson, 1990; Rushing, 1983) and subsequent farming safety (Kelsey, 1994; Slotkin, 1985). Also, Shortall (2001) studied the role of women in farming and land-owning, but these studies focus on farming and communication from alternative perspectives which, helpfully, inform my research but do not target the application of the family farm to a larger organization or institution.

While a plethora of studies involving farming families may not exist, there is still much to be drawn from surrounding disciplines to inform my research on the farming family. Coontz (1992, 1997, 1999) examines the family from the perspective of mythic nostalgia and reality by approaching family studies from a historical perspective.
Examining social perceptions and expectations of families, especially working families rooted in the western ethic of farming, can lend insight to the construction of the farm family.

Honing in on the public myths surrounding traditional and ideal families, Coontz (1992) targeted the public perceptions and ideals of family life by historically examining different time periods and constructing a framework for comparing family quality and dynamics. “Family idealization” is a concept that strikes the heart of many mothers and fathers (Coontz, 1992), but the public perception of family farms is perhaps in the category of over-idealization. There is a mythic quality assigned to western people of the land (Rushing, 1983) that is transferred to farmers. Thought to be conservative, altruistic, nurturing caretakers of land (Berry, 1977), farmers have become idealized if not labeled as ‘backward’ or technologically behind for the times. As still presently depicted in movies as a flannel plaid shirt-wearing, denim-clad farming cowboy (see Kenner, 2008), farmers have virtually entered a realm of having enviable family values and modeling the way of life that may not be feasible for everyone but desired by most. As stated by Frentz (1978), ‘myth’ describes

A society’s collectivity of persistent values, handed down from generation to generation, that help to make the world understandable, support the social order, and educate the society’s young. Myths change slowly and are widely taught [often through stories] and believed. They are expressed in the dominant symbols and rituals of the culture. (p. 67)
Mythic ways of life persist in the perceptions of cowboys and men of the frontier (Harter, 2004; Rushing, 1983). According to Harter (2004), “the mythic image that anchors the frontier thesis is that of the frontiersman, a heroic character who ventured forth into unchartered territory, supposedly independent of others’ symbolic and material resources, to win a decisive victory against all odds” (p. 91). The idea of agrarianism (Montmarquet, 1990) addresses the contradictory nature of farming characterizations: farmers embody independence and self-reliance, yet are viewed as though they were chartered to “serve the general welfare” and “subordinate private interests or profit-seeking” (Coontz, 1992, p. 99). Up until the past five years of farmers posting high profit margins (and thus pushing smaller farmers out of business), farmers were seen as intimately connected to the earth and perhaps unconcerned with the financial gains that a corner-office-inhabiting executive might be. The mythic qualities of the western frontiersman and farmer have placed farmers today in a protected category of capitalists who still receive the empathy and admiration of the public. While this is not uncalled for, I argue, as does Coontz (1992) that the mythic way of life is perhaps troublesome to understand when taken out of a historical context.

Examining family farms provides an opportunity to see how families describe and talk about their family values. I find it informative and helpful to learn how these self-perceived models of family match the mythic idealized perception of families that Coontz (1992) espoused, especially in light of the fact that farm families are, by all working definition, organizations; organizations pass culture through their values. Viewing families as venues to teach morality, values, ethics, and ways of life is an interesting
approach when applied to family farmers because family farms are both a site of work and raising of family. For a farm family, the family is the lifeblood of the organization; what children know about farming is handed down to them from previous generations.

The organizational culture of family farms and their subsequent farming practices is the thesis of this dissertation. By studying the culture of a farm family through the lens of organizational communication, we gain access to the values, behavior patterns, rituals, traditions, and attitudes, which are all widely-agreed elements of culture. As posited by Schein (1993), a useful way to think about culture is an:

…Accumulated shared learning of a given group, covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of the group members’ total psychological functioning.

For shared learning to occur, there must be a history of shared experience, which in turn implies some stability of membership in the group. (p. 372)

Additional categories of included phenomena in Schein’s (1993) concept of culture include observed behavioral regularities in interaction (language, customs, traditions, rituals), group norms, espoused values, formal philosophy, rules of the game, climate, embedded skills, habits of thinking and mental models, shared meanings, and, what Schein called “‘root metaphors’: the ideas, feelings, and images groups develop to characterize themselves that may or may not be appreciated consciously but that become embodied … in material artifacts of the group” (p. 372). The stability that pervades the perception of American farming paired with the constructs of organizational communication begins to paint a picture of the intersection of family dynamics, organizational culture, and the resulting farming practices. However, successful farming
requires the succession of future generations. To examine the picture from all facets, organizational communication, culture, and inter-generational communication converge to determine the success or failure of family farms.

Sometimes in multi-generational farm families, children are expected and encouraged to partake in the farm (and thus family) activities (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1991; Bigner, Miller & Jacobsen, 1980; Weigel & Weigel, 1990); values, work ethics, and life lessons might be shared differently when the family variables change due to work. Time spent together, shared activity between parent and child, and accessibility/availability of parents are all qualities judged by the public to be ‘good’ parenting practices (Coontz, 1992), and these qualities converge on family farms. However, a mythic perception might permeate farm families which do not quite espouse these values in reality. This aspect of farm life has not been studied in over 25 years, during which time much has changed in farming practices.

Farming as Organizing and Environmental Social Movements

Issues of environmental awareness and sustainability are on the rise nationally, and becoming a popular trend for many businesses and customers, including organic and non-organic farmers. Popular studies show that production and sale of organic food is up 20% each year. The sustainability movement is gaining interest among consumers and scholars alike, and is a rich area to examine in terms of economics, environmental impact, and farming.

Although the organized discipline of environmental communication is fairly new, the issues concerning environmentally sustainable practices are not. Environmental
communication has emerged as a crisis discipline, and is perceived by some as a discipline with an ethical duty (Cox, 2007). As a discipline with a purported ethical duty, Killingsworth (2007) suggests that “part of the ethical duty is to explain and combat the forgetfulness that causes people to lose track of their place in the world and to ignore the state of the ‘environment’” (p. 59).

The food movement focusing on where our food originates and how food is grown is building momentum and gaining members. Critical scholars and farmers (see Salatin, 2007) are demanding increased transparency from governmental agencies, such as the Food & Drug administration and the United States Department of Agriculture, regarding the labeling of food containing genetically modified ingredients, use of hormones, antibiotics, and pesticides and herbicides, and accountability for the increased rate of bacterial infections such as E. coli.

Unless individuals avidly and explicitly attempt to avoid messages regarding the public debate of food, land, chemicals, recycling, global warming, pollution, energy consumption, and biotechnology’s involvement in the food we grow and eat, they will inevitably be exposed to the debate. This national (and global) debate has the attention of many different groups of people and has reached the scale of social movement (Hawken, 2007). Exploring the role of farmers in the larger social movement could provide clarity and perspective on the vast trajectory and impact of farmers’ practices on the nation. Keeping farmers at the root of the discussion is important, but introducing and incorporating literature from rhetoric, activist, and social change disciplines can better inform farmers’ impact.
Much of the driving force behind the environmental movement is the power and dominance of large corporations. Monsanto, DuPont, General Mills, Perdue, Walmart, and Nestle are just some of the large companies heavily scrutinized by activists - and with good reason. As Deetz (1992) wrote,

Corporate organizations make most decisions regarding the use of resources, the development of technologies, the products available, and the work relations among people. Organizational decisions, products, and practices have major effects on human development. Anything that influences the continued formation or deformation of the human character has ethical implications. While no one is in a position to define the social good or what the human character ultimately should be like, the full representation of differing people and their interest would seem to be fundamental to ethical choices regarding development. (p. 3)

Deetz (1992) has honed in on an integral element of democracy and the role of corporations. When dealing with the United States’ food system, corporations control our food and activists argue that the result of this food-based corporate colonization is hunger, pollution, instability, and obesity (Nochi, Stern & Pibel, 2009). Currently, four companies pack 83.5% of beef and 66% of pork, and crush 80% of soybeans; two companies [Pioneer and Monsanto] sell 58% of all U.S. seed corn; and corporations produce 98% of all poultry in the United States (Nochi, Stern & Pibel, 2009).

As Deetz (1992) stated, corporate organizations control much of our daily life. What seems to stump individuals especially of older generations, though, is when and how did food become corporatized? When and how did farm bills begin to so directly
affect our food choices? Enter the workings of democracy. What is troublesome, however, is that most of the advancements with farming and food came as welcome relief alongside industrialization and the division of labor. The percentage of disposable income spent on food for the average American family is the lowest in history (Clauson, 2008). Whereas the United States has much to celebrate, there are (and have been) signs of trouble (see Berry, 1977; Carson 1962; Leopold, 1949).

If these shifts in environmental perspective can be approached from a large corporation perspective, another approach exists of looking from the perspective of small business owner, community member, and family farmer. Social change is typically a response to a group of poor, vulnerable, silenced, and marginalized people trying to gain in political, economic, and social power (Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2006). Social change does not happen quickly because successful organizational change takes time. However, for someone to feel marginalized or disserved by their democracy, there needs to be an inability to exercise choice or an imbalance of equalities; as stated by Papa, Singhal & Papa, “dignity comes from exercising some form of choice” (p. 33).

For an uprising to reach the magnitude of the environmental movement, populations must feel as though they are losing control of their choice or decision. Bottled water is made possible because fresh water is taken and exported from areas of the country; this now means that water rights acquisitions make up much of the water ownership in the world (Salina, 2008). The fertile (and fragile) soils of Hawaii are chemical testing grounds for Monsanto and DuPont, likened to military tactical testing, and all inhabitants – flora, fauna, and humans – are posting signs of distress (Cummings,
Issues of food labeling, specifically listing both natural and chemical ingredients, are gaining public attention in the name of transparency. Currently, there is no labeling regulation for genetically modified food, so there is very little traceability to know if the food you’re about to purchase or eat has been genetically modified (Pirello, 2008). Knowing from where your food comes and what is included are just some of the smaller-scale issues that feed into the same problem of most social movement agitators: grievances and alleged violation of human rights and moral principles (Bowers, Ochs, & Jensen, 1993).

According to Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen (1993), “agitation exists when people outside the normal decision-making establishment advocate significant social change and encounter a degree of resistance within the establishment such as to require more than the normal discursive means of persuasion” (p. 4). Control refers to the response of the decision-making establishment to agitation. The rhetoric of social movements is consistent through time. According to Bowers et al. (1993), the recipe for social change includes an emotional argument and moral principles, which is visible in the movement for ethically and sustainably-grown food, in many cases free from chemicals, and specifically in the case of Appalachia, a healthy local food system (OhioFoodshed, 2009).

The connection between small farmers and large corporations lies in control. Establishments [aka large corporations] have a distinct advantage over the agitators [dissenters] because of their superior power and their ability to adjust to the tactics used by activists. …Because of their wealth, power, and status, members of the establishment have greater control over language, the media of
mass communication and other channels of influence, information, expertise, agendas, and settings. (Bowers, Ochs & Jensen, pp. 8-9)

While not all people active in their community want to be seen as community activists, protesting the trajectory and practice of big businesses is part of democracy. Nonviolent forms of resistance include the efforts of Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez. The rhetoric of social change, agitation, and control, can be examined from a micro-analytical perspective, such as to identify that corporations who control might choose to ignore, suppress, or deny public attacks (Bowers, Ochs & Jensen, 1993), but the focus of this study is to learn more about the farmer’s place in the larger scheme and how their perspective informs their farming practices.

As stated by Shragge (2003), community and local organizing for social change is complex with its own structural issues:

In the creation of new community-based organizations, the emphasis on participation and process is the source of the democratic innovation that shapes many new practices. One can criticize prefiguration for being utopian and, therefore, not something easily incorporated into the daily struggles for specific gains which, by necessity, are shaped by more pragmatic practices. However, in its refinement over the years, the quest for democracy in the everyday helps shape many new forms of organizing and bequeaths a powerful legacy. (p. 86)

Theorists such as American pragmatists James (1907), Mead (1963), and Dewey (1927) understand the issues of democracy. Gadamer (1989) and Habermas (1989) have, through their writings, produced a conception of how to approach the issues of
democracy from a communicative standpoint (Deetz, 1992). Dewey’s (1927) work in particular is consistent with social movements. Exploring the connections between Appalachian family farmers, organizational culture and identity, and environmental movements, Dewey (1927) offers a framework to make sense of the interconnections within a bureaucratic structure.

Role of the Public, Democratic State, and Great Community

The theoretical sensibilities I draw from for this dissertation come from the likes of Berger and Luckman (1989), Mead (1963), Goffman (1959, 1967), Giddens (1979), and Dewey (1927). The specific theoretical framework to be directly applied in this dissertation comes from Dewey (1927). This ethnography examines how Dewey’s (1927) concepts of the public, state, and community apply to the current agriculture and environmental situation in the United States.

When examining the competing forces yeomen face, Dewey’s (1927) discussion of the public illuminates the role farmers play in governmental bureaucracy. In trying to understand the public’s role, we first have to address the state. When understanding Dewey’s (1927) concept of ‘the state,’ multiple possible interpretations exist of what he meant by state; the state as an organized oppression and an official arbiter of conflict among other social institutions are two interpretations that link directly to the search for the public.

For Dewey (1927), individuals working on behalf of the state are public: “When the public or state is involved in making social arrangements like passing laws, enforcing a contract, conferring a franchise, it still acts through concrete persons. The persons are
now officers, representatives of a public and shared interest” (Dewey, 1927, p. 18). The public is also an infrastructure for public and private actions of individuals. Private actions are views as actions that only impact the two people in a relationship; public actions affect others. “The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey, 1927, p. 16). The role of the state converges with the public when associations, or groups of collected individuals, conduct themselves in a way that impacts large numbers of people:

Those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is The Public. This public is organized and made effective by means of representatives who as guardians of custom, as legislators, as executives, judges, etc., care for its especial interests by methods intended to regulate the conjoint actions of individuals and groups. Then and in so far, association adds to itself political organization, and something which may be government comes into being: the public is a political state. (Dewey, 1927, p. 35)

The public as a political state enters the current global food crisis in the vision of organic food customers seeking a healthier alternative to pesticide-laden apples. The public, however, believes that the state will protect the people, and as such, responds accordingly when the public is alerted about salmonella outbreaks or contaminated peanut butter. If the state serves the good of the public, at what point does the state respond to the demands of the public (such as to increase government funding for
subsidize organic farming) and likewise, when does the public begin to question the state (such as tracing government funding back to large chemical companies who produce pesticides and genetic modification)? The public’s examination of competing forces regarding the state is a perfect instance of how small family farmers begin to make sense of their options, values, and farming practices.

For Dewey (1927), the state can be identified as the entity that is localized (meaning that conjoined people are not too large or too small to give rise to the public), diversified (matter within the state are public or private), deals with old, well-engrained, established behaviors (such as farming), and that takes up the down-trodden, such as children. Dewey (1927) explained that, “the net import of our discussion is that a state is a distinctive and secondary form of association, having a specifiable work to do and specified organs of operation” (p. 71). The state’s scope and functions, as a specific association that houses public and private action, will vary in time and space, and thus so too should the concrete functions of the state (Dewey, 1927).

After identifying the state within an organizing body of people, the role of the state emerges. For Dewey (1927), a state’s measure of goodness is how well the state relieves individuals from the stress of conflict. In a Hobbesian (1928) sense, preventing war and creating a safe existence for people to live is the foundation of a state’s role. Once more progressed, the steps taken by a state to relieve individuals from conflict can become a consequence of actions. What was a relief then can become a crisis now, such as the farming situation in the United States. As the state took measured steps to help farmers increase grain production in the 1970s (Berry, 1977), the long-term effects have
become something of a monster. Dewey (1927) can be directly applied to the current situation of family farmers in the United States today by applying the varied scope and function and subsequent concrete functions of the state in response to the time and space of the public. By encouraging farming production on a scale that cannot be sustained without the aid of government subsidies (e.g., Cheney & Ellis, 2007), the long-term viability of this plan needs to be revisited by deciding entities.

The competing forces in a democratic state are apparent as people have dual and conflicting roles within the state (Dewey, 1927). People in the state act as individuals with non-political aims yet are simultaneously part of a state that tries to get people to act with regard for social (and thus political?) ends. This leads us to unpacking what we see happening in the public when individuals take initiative by taking active part in a democratic process. Whose desires are being privileged? What competing, colliding, and confronting values drive people to behave in certain ways? Dewey (1927) helps illuminate this dissertation by recognizing that none of the issues people confront stand alone, and that most social and public issues are complex in a web structure.

According to Dewey (1927), the democratic state is a public (on a macro level) that is enacted through individuals (on a micro level). As a form of government, democracy is intended to counteract old ways of doing things that limit individuals; democracy is an outcome of many adjustments and adaptations, meant to undo injustices from other forms of government (Dewey, 1927). However, paradoxical forces arise yet again:
The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislators chosen by a majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public. The new age of human relationships” has no political agencies worthy of it. The democratic public is still largely inchoate and unorganized. (Dewey, 1927, p. 109)

Applying Dewey’s (1927) framework toward understanding family farmers as political tools helps me to position the situation of family farmers in a way to remove value judgments or blame. By understanding that farmers have both a macro and micro role within the state explains the larger social contributions farmers make in an effort to fulfill their needs at a macro level. Many large conventional farmers simply want to earn a living, provide their family a nice life, and leave an inheritance to their children, all which is possible through (governmentally influenced) crop production. On a micro level, this life is honorable and worthy of support. However, to frame this farmer in a larger picture, the farmer has now become an icon of environmental destruction and disregard for an ecological system that still leaves many people starving (Thurow & Kilman, 2009). This tension, paradox, and urgent social dilemma can be understood through Dewey’s (1927) understanding of the public, state, democracy, and communication.

Dewey’s (1927) perspective of the community’s role adds another layer to our understanding of family farmers from a communication perspective. By searching for and attempting to understanding community, we begin to see how collectives are formed.
Associations to others (through community) is physical and organic; communal life is moral, emotional, and consciously sustained – through communication (Dewey, 1927). It is through communication that humans are able to both connect but also individualize.

For communication scholars, Dewey’s (1927) adherence to communication’s role in social organizing (via community) keeps Dewey firmly in the realm of theoretical frameworks from which to draw when attempting to understand culture from an ethnographic perspective. By examining the communication within an organized group of people, we can learn the habits and subsequent ways of thinking (think Burke’s (1984) fossilized institutions) that could shed light on the underlying values informing practice, such as with farming.

The ways in which Dewey helps me understand the situation of family farmers lies at the intersection of understanding the public and private roles of individuals, micro and macro family goals (which often result in competing values), the state’s role in agriculture and the initial intent toward reducing conflict and securing safety, and the community’s role in voicing a collective opinion in a democratic forum. The components come together to describe one perspective of the food situation in our country today that so many people are spending time and energy addressing; the number of books addressing food (Pollan, 2006; 2008), the documentaries addressing food and food production (Cheney, Ellis & Wolfe, 2007; Kenner, 2008), and the daily incorporation of messages encouraging people to live “greener” lives through what we commonly recognize as green washing (Hayward, 2009), which is when companies attempt to promote environmental awareness which happen to also be cost-cutting strategies.
Summary and Research Questions

It is my goal to understand more about the cultural values family farmers incorporate into their decisions regarding farming practices, and I see value in using Dewey’s framework incorporating the public, state, and community into this discussion. Communication scholars have long used Dewey (paired with other theorists and philosophers) for his communication sensibilities when studying the public. Important to communication scholars is the emphasis on communication in social phenomena, and this is in part my motivation to study the communicative sense-making family farmers engage in when integrating countless messages into their farming practices. Applying Dewey (1927) to the communication among family farmers in the social, family, public, and community sense is both timely and never before studied. In this vein, I arrive at the following research questions:

RQ1: How are environmental issues understood and enacted by farmers?

RQ2: What challenges do Appalachian farming families face as they organize their farming operation?

RQ3: What cultural values drive the farming practices of families in the southeast Ohio Appalachian region?

RQ4: What does environmental responsibility mean to farmers?

RQ5: How do farmers understand their world?
CHAPTER THREE:
METHOD

The ethnographer seeks a deeper immersion in others’ worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important. With immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so. In this way immersion gives the fieldworker access to the fluidity of others’ lives and enhances his sensitivity to interaction and process. (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 2)

For this research study, I approached studying the lives of farming families from an interpretive standpoint, and did so by utilizing several qualitative approaches. By using various methodologies, I attempted to gain a rich understanding of the participants’ experiences, perspectives, and research settings. According to Putnam (1983), “interpretive approaches aim to explicate and, in some cases, to critique the subjective and consensual meanings that constitute social reality” (p. 32). Through observations, in-depth interviews, participant photography, and document analysis, I sought to learn more about the participants’ lives as farmers, their perspectives on the values guiding their farming and family decisions, as well as the meanings and interpretations associated with the various methods of food production and social movements.

However, while seeking information about life on a farm in Appalachia, I strived to remain reflexive about my role as the researcher both in my influence and presence among the families as well as my history as a farmer’s daughter. When asked about my
research, I explained that I was conducting research on area farmers and their growing practices for my graduate work in communication. Unless the farmers showed additional interest in my graduate studies, I did not volunteer that I was working toward my Ph.D. or doctorate degree, and I did not refer to my research as a dissertation. I also remained aware that the knowledge and experiences I hold having grown up on a farm were present throughout my interpretation of observations and data, and I was mindful of my background when farmers introduced me to new ideas as well as concepts that were counter to my previous knowledge.

Much of my interest in qualitative research methods lies in the freedom of gaining a deep understanding about a specific slice of life, free of expectations placed on traditional science, but not without rigor. In this light, it is my hope to provide a rich description of the driving cultural values and perspectives of families who farm in the Appalachian Ohio region.

Interpretive Research Methods and Ethnographic Fieldwork

In my quest to understand more about the cultural values of the farming families in the Appalachian region, I turned to interpretive methods, specifically ethnography. Ethnography’s root meaning, *ethno-*, meaning people and *-graphy* meaning describing, is targeted at knowing more about a cultural membership (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As an interpretive method, ethnography attempts a holistic representation of a culture by involving the research and researcher in the cultural environment of the participants. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) noted that writing, a key role in interpretive methods especially ethnography, is both process and product:
In ethnography, process and product are joined closely. Ethnography is textual in the dual sense that (a) writing is a key activity in all phases of field research, and (b) writing “fixes” cultural analysis within the dialectic of field relations worked out between researcher and cultural members. What is left in and what is left out, whose point of view is represented, and how the scenes of social life are depicted become very important matters for assessing the “poetics and politics” of the ethnographic text. (p. 17)

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) likened qualitative researchers to bricoleurs who work with any and all reasonable, available means to construct a product. “The interpretive bricoleur produces a bricolage – that is, a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). As noted in the root meaning of bricoleur (“quilt maker”), an interpretive researcher uses ethnography to piece together different perspectives and pieces through the use of different methods in the hope “to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 7). The primary assumption of ethnography is that reality is subjective; objective reality is only understood through representations (Clair, 2003; Van Maanen, 1988) and the artist or weaver, subsequently the researching author, serves as the representative. In this dissertation, I served as a representative of the stories and lives shared to me by farmers and their family members.

Enter here the crisis of representation (Martin, 2001). How does a researcher become immersed into a culture ripe with interpretations and carry out those interpretations in a way that is not imperious but yet frames the culture in a way to
convey meaning to outsiders? Geertz (1973), who claimed a semiotic view of culture, offered the sage advice of incorporating “thick descriptions” into qualitative research writing towards a goal of verisimilitude – where the realness of the settings and scenes are described to the reader in a way that conveys the truth of the environment. Borrowing from anthropology, Geertz (1973) argued that in the finished written words of research, 

> What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to – [this] is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined. …Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification. (p. 9)

By incorporating “thick descriptions” into writing, readers are better situated to determine if they (the reader) would have responded the same way the researcher did to surrounding environmental stimuli (Geertz, 1973; Martin, 2001). The narrative structures employed when writing about culture also provide guidance when representing a culture; realist, confessional, and impressionist tales by Van Maanen (1988) help guide the author (and thus the reader) through a coherent representation of a culture from a consistent perspective. The realist tale narrates in third-person voice the observable workings of a culture in hopes of an authentic cultural representation delivered through the text; the confessional tale is a highly personalized account of a researcher’s experience utilizing the first person to take ownership of the study’s authority; the impressionist tale is less
used in academic writing but nonetheless writes from a personal perspective to convey
the scene to the reader as though they were both present (Van Maanen, 1988).

Throughout my attempt to represent the cultural values of family farmers, I
employed all three of Van Maanen’s (1988) narrative structures to deliver, in the most
genuine way possible, my experiences and interpretations of the cultures I encountered.

In the following sections, I outline my methodological approach to this dissertation. My
approach to interpretive methods through ethnographic fieldwork, the settings and
participants of this study, my role as the researcher and reflexivity, data collection and
implemented methods, and data analysis will be discussed.

Setting and Participants

For this research project, I sought to interview, observe, and learn from farming
families in the rural Appalachian foothills of southeast Ohio. This region was chosen
specifically for the unique culture and topography, and the advanced incorporation of
local foods and environmental movement awareness. This area is farther along in
advancing a local food system than other areas Ohio, Appalachia, Michigan, and
Pennsylvania (MacDonald, 2009). Essentially, this region of southeastern, Appalachian
Ohio stands as a model for other rural, urban, and suburban areas wanting to increase
their local food sustainability. Many independent family farms and intentional
communities (such as communes and co-housing communities) existing throughout the
hills work small patches of tillable land, but there is an absence of large farming
machinery, which dominates Midwest conventional grain and livestock farms. Due to the
unavailability of large parcels of flat land, there is no need for large-acre heavy
machinery. What results is an absence of large green John Deere farm implements, and instead an incorporation of older technology such as animal and human energy; in fact, it is common for organic farms to use tractors, horse-drawn chisel plows, and other farming equipment from the 1960s or earlier, much of what is second- or third-hand and requires regular repairs (Fromartz, 2006).

Approaching the study of Appalachian family farmers from an ethnographic perspective enabled me to gain a more intimate glimpse into the culture of the family farmers. As stated by Van Maanen (1988),

I think we need now, more than ever, concrete, sharp, complex, empathetic, and politically sensitive portraits of what others might really be like if we are to learn, tolerate, balk, help, confront, instruct, or otherwise adjust to the uncountable ways of living and being that surround us” (p. xiii).

Ethnographic approaches and fieldwork are idiographic in nature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with goals to understand the gradations, distinctiveness, and particularities of a certain culture, situation, or context. In order to achieve perspective on the cultural values of family farmers, I began fieldwork by journeying into the farming areas where families live and work.

Through snowball and chain sampling (Creswell, 2007) I contacted farming families who granted me access to interviews and observations at their farm. When gathering interview data, I wanted to keep the farmers and their families in their naturalistic environment. All interviews were held at family farmsteads except for one farming family, which was due to inclement weather and subsequently dangerous roads.
This exception was held at a public library. During writing up the results from these interviews, my goal was to translate my observations and interpretations in a way that preserves the integrity of the data, and I worked at doing this through the use of thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) which put the voices of the farmers and family members at the forefront of my research focus. As explained later in the methodology, I believed participant photography would enable and encourage the voices of the participants by equalizing the power dynamic between researcher and participant.

As an ethnographer, my involvement in the research strategically placed me on the cusp of many different cultures. As the daughter of a three-generation farming family, I am well-versed in the operation of a farm and am, to a certain point, socialized into the farming culture. Much of my knowledge about farming in the Midwest translates to other types of farming. It is this prior knowledge that specifically eased my access to farming families. As stated by Van Maanen (1988),

Rapport with certain informants may preclude it with others. Fieldworkers in some settings are granted relatively rapid access to culturally sacred matters; in other setting they will learn nothing about them unless they devote their professional careers to such a pursuit. Fieldworkers may present themselves as delicately lurking, working, and getting results, but the results they achieve are always experientially contingent and highly variable by setting and by person. (p. 4)

My ability to build rapport with farming families was perhaps derived from my childhood experiences growing on a farm. As is the case with most qualitative research
and articulated by Van Maanen (1988), my research results can and will vary drastically from other qualitative interpretive research projects, simply due to my status as a white, young female who was anticipatorily socialized into farming cultures. Conversely, I remained aware that my experiences growing up on a farm did not necessarily enable me to connect with all farmers and their families, and thus I did not assume easy access or similarity of experience. No two experiences are identical, and I remained aware that I cannot experience someone else’s experience; I can merely experience their behavior (Laing, 1967).

Additionally, I understood that entering the culture of rural Appalachia was sure to have its own unique challenges. Being from the central Midwest and not an Appalachian native, I anticipated encountering unique speech patterns and varying levels of directness (Puckett, 2000). I was correct in these anticipations and encountered many instances of local dialect and both an indirectness as well as reticence to share that dissolved upon encouragement. Through studying the direct and (mostly) indirect forms of language used by Appalachian coal miners, Puckett (2000) found that “an active and educationally significant heteroglossia in Bakhtin’s (1981) sense of multiple interpretations of speech [exist] that disrupt the dominant norms or at least call them into question” (p. 5). I remained open to different types of both direct and passive forms of communication; perhaps this is part of the reason I chose to use participant photography, and I did find the photographs useful.

Furthermore, the straddling of two very distinct cultures of academics and farming has strategically placed me in a unique situation. The academic community is
sometimes targeted or scorned by blue collar cultures for being over-analyzing, or, as stated by my father, a group of “egghead, educated idiots who are best at analysis paralysis.” I anticipated and was prepared for receiving any possible perceptions farming families might have had of me, and I worked to reduce any possible apprehension and build rapport by sharing my experiences of growing up on a farm and showing genuine interest in their farming operation. As it turned out, I drew on past knowledge I never thought I would again use. Telling stories about growing up on a dairy farm and spending time with my grandfather in the operator’s pit of our milking parlor was enough to gain open access to one farming family that milked dairy cows; having a knowledge of hand-quilting blankets and piecing together quilt blocks gained me the good graces of one farm wife which in turn opened increased access to her husband and children. However, the farming background I possess enabled me to make a significant contribution to the academic community of increasing insight into a less-often studied group, farmers. My positioning in the “borderlands” of two cultures (MacDonald & Bernardo, 2005) afforded me the insight to better represent both cultures. For me, the “politics of positionality” (Scott & Shah, 1993) in this research study included the ties I have to farming communities, family, friends, and local issues associated with current farming trends and debates. Likewise, this fluency aided my entrance into research of more bureaucratic structures from the perspectives of natives to better inform academic communities.

Naples (2003) discussed the contested debate of the role of ethnographic researchers from the perspective of insider and outsider positions:
Advocates of ‘insider’ research assert that non-natives may be unable to gain the deeper understandings of cultural practices and beliefs that are available to insiders. Insiders have greater linguistic competence than outsiders, can blend in more easily, and are less likely to affect social settings. Advocates of ‘outsider’ research, on the other hand, insist that non-natives can be more objective in observing and analyzing social contexts and cultural beliefs. (p. 46)

Naples (2003) focused closely on a researcher’s ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ by understanding a researcher’s tenuous, floating position among participants:

Outsiderness and insiderness are not fixed or static positions. Rather, they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations that are differentially experienced and expressed by community members. By recognizing the fluidity of outsiderness/insiderness, we also acknowledge three key methodological points: as ethnographers we are never fully outside or inside the “community”; our relationship to the community is never expressed in general terms but is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated in particular, everyday interactions; and these interaction are themselves enacted in shifting relationships among community residents. These negotiations are manifest in local processes that reposition gender, class, and racial-ethnic relations among other socially constructed distinctions (p. 49)

Researcher’s Role and Reflexivity

As in other forms of social science research, a methodological issue to be considered in ethnographic methods is the researcher’s reflexivity. For this specific type
of study and style of approach, the reflexivity and representation in my writing of farmer’s experiences ideally needed to be at a heightened awareness. As the researcher, I hold the stories and experiences of farmers and their families in my hands and my words. I do not attempt to make sweeping assumptions and empirical claims about the lives, experiences, and perspectives of the farmers and their family members. I agree with Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) in their position that “researchers do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge” (p. 961).

As qualitative interpretive researcher, I believe the role of the researcher (and thus representative author of other people’s experiences and lives) is to convey to the reader that this specific writing and interpretation is derived not separate from, but in accordance with, the contexts of the researcher’s life. The contested terrain of others’ experiences, values, positions, and lives cannot be (fairly) understood through the written words without at least a nod to, if not substantial incorporation of, the author’s biases, experiences, references, interpretations, stance, and position (Agger, 1991). My goals throughout this research project and subsequent manuscript were to be aware of my biases, experiences, references interpretations, stances, and positions as I proceeded through the project, and to remain aware of how my perceptions and interpretations were contextually situated in my life. Ultimately, I hoped to have produced a fairly representative account of the experiences and cultural values of family farmer’s in southeast Ohio, and conveyed those experiences to the reader in a way that, through
understanding my biases and frames of references, readers could draw their own
conclusions about alternate ways to interpret the experiences of farmers’.

I strived to represent, not author, the lives of others. To monitor my position
within the research, I drew from Van Maanan (1988) and Emerson, Fretz and Shaw
(1995) to guide my writing style and incorporation of self in the manuscript. I took
reflective jottings (Emerson et al., 1995) of what I felt and saw throughout the data
collection process. When the time came to write up research and analyze field notes, I
was better equipped to maintain cognizance of my position within the collected data by
virtue of having frames of reference that helped me go back to specific instances and
environments.

While it was my intention to fairly offer representation to the voices, perceptions,
and experiences of others, I recognized my position as the researcher to both champion
and protect the material participants supplied me. Consent and confidentiality were
extremely important to obtain and protect, and through the Ohio University Institutional
Review Board and my own set of morals and ethics, I did everything in my power to
protect the participants (see Appendix A for IRB Research Approval). Pseudonyms have
been given to interview participants and public officials, primary information that could
potentially identify a participant has been removed, and portraits were only published
with the expressed consent of the depicted (see Appendix B for IRB Informed Consent
and Appendix C for Scripps College Photograph Release Form).
Data Collection

In the spirit of representing and articulating the multiple perspectives of lived truths, I sought a data collection framework that enabled me to approach participants from multiple angles. While triangulation is a popular modus operandi to break free from rigid, privileged boundaries of research, Richardson (2000) identified

The scholar might have different “takes” on the same topic, what I think of as postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation…. In postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate, we crystallize… I propose that the central image for “validity” for postmodern texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach… Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. (p. 934, original emphasis)

By proceeding in my research through the approach of crystallization of qualitative methods, I occupied the middle ground of ethnographic methods on the qualitative research continuum (Ellingson, 2009). Through the data collection methods of participant photography (also called photo elicitation and participatory action research), in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, I addressed questions such as, ‘How do farmers understand their world?’ and ‘How do farmers and myself as the author co-construct a world?’ Some goals of my research included, “to construct situated knowledges, to explore the typical, to generate description and
understanding, to trouble the taken-for-granted, and to generate pragmatic implications for practitioners” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 8). Methods appropriate for this qualitative approach which I engaged included semi-structured interviewing, participant observation, participant action research, and document analysis.

Over a six-month period, I spent all but two weeks in the rural farming community absorbing daily actions of community members. I informally observed people at local grocery stores, slow food restaurants, libraries, and through merely walking in town. I formally spent 98 hours observing and interviewing farmers and community members. Overall, I conducted 12 interviews with farm families and community members combined. The average length of an interview was three hours. My goal was to obtain the participation of 10 farming families, and I achieved interviews with nine farming families which totaled 19 family members, or roughly two family members per interview. Interviews were digitally voice recorded and transcribed, totally 292 pages of interview transcription. All transcribing was completed by the researcher. The following sections detail the rationale and process for each of these approaches, in the hopes that crystallization can provide a more complex understanding of the lives, values, and perspectives of farmers in the Appalachian region.

Part of the appeal of a crystallized approach to this research project is the facilitation and possibility of reaching a deepened, thick description (Geertz, 1973). “Multiple ways of understanding and representing participants’ experiences not only provide more description, but more points of connection through their angles of vision on a given topic” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 15). The four main forms of data identified by
Creswell (2007) to access these understandings and experiences include observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials. These four avenues are discussed in detail beginning with participant photography and followed by observation, interviews, and documents.

**Participant Photography**

As the cost and portability of digital technologies makes visual exploration entirely feasible across disciplines and as the image undoubtedly becomes a language of our populations of interest, social scientists will increasingly appropriate these media. In many ways, the tools for doing so are already tucked away in our methodological kits. ....Images need not, in fact should not, be considered the providence of one discipline or held to one set of readings. Instead, images derive meaning from the way they are used, discussed, analyzed, and imputed with meaning. As such, images will inform our disciplines as we subject them to the same scrutiny and the same use as any other qualitative (or quantitative) methodologies. (Stanczak, 2004, p. 1475)

In the outskirts of Appalachia, rural farmers and producers work to keep family farms alive. Despite recent economic downturns, these farmers and families are relatively insulated from the financial recession; sales of their home-grown products are stable if not steadily increasing. Organically grown produce, homemade jam and baked goods, and clay pottery are some of the goods sold throughout the area that meet a desire for locally grown and produced goods. The national demand for organic and chemical-free goods is increasing, but how do the rural farmers view environmental responsibility?
Many farmers in the area use manual labor to weed fields instead of machinery, but why? Do local farmers enact environmental consciousness and sustainability as a response to the national trend of climate change awareness, or due to lack of resources to finance machinery, chemical fertilizers, and refining materials? My work sought to capture how local farming families viewed their role in the local (and national) environmental movement of organically grown products.

In order to capture the essence and rationalities behind family farmers’ work patterns and ethics, in-depth interviews were conducted to give voice to the farmers. In order to facilitate these interviews, farmers and their families were asked to capture the life of today’s farmer in part through photographs. An inquiry letter was sent to 15 families within a five county distance. A self-addressed postcard with pre-paid postage was included in the initial letter. On the reverse of the postcard were the four options: to decline enrollment in the research project; to decline participation but to feel free to contact in the future; to participate in the research but first needing additional information; and agreement to full participation in the research project. Of the 15 initial letters, nine families agreed to participate in the study. Two families declined participation, and four families did not respond. Cameras were immediately mailed to participating families with a loose script of what to photograph, and farmers were also encouraged to photograph whatever they felt was important or interesting. Of the nine cameras sent out, only five were returned to me via a self-addressed pre-paid padded envelope. Some participants wanted to email me photos previously taken that showcased their farm in the height of growing season. One participant did not want to “mess with the
camera thing” but agreed to an interview. Another participant forgot to take photos but still wanted me to come out to their farm if I was still interested. I was still interested, so I forwent the photos and absorbed what they shared in an extremely informative interview.

Participants who took photos had relative freedom over what was photographed. Photos were taken by farmers, spouses, children, parents, and employees. The goals of the photographs were to learn what farmers viewed as important actions in working to make a farm successful, and to open and facilitate communication about their line of work during an interview. The following is summary and rationale of participant photography, photo elicitation, shooting guide, visual representation, and various forms of scholarly support for the use of photography in qualitative research methods.

Photography made its debut in the 1830s and has since been employed in daily life (albeit more with time) for the past 180 years (Heisley & Levy, 1991). The introduction of photography in social science research projects dates back to Bateson and Mead’s (1942) classic visual study on life of the Balinese in Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis. In this book, the depictions of Balinese culture are studied through the images captured, which provides an interpretively rich understanding of the culture (Heisley & Levy, 1991). Film and photography continued to evolve and it was in the 1960s that Collier (1967) introduced photography as a method of qualitative inquiry. In many cases, a camera is used as a research tool.

Collier (1967) and Collier and Collier (1986) introduced photo elicitation (also discussed as photoelicitation and projective photo interviewing) as a method that used images to guide and stimulate interviews (Carlsson, 2001; Harper, 1986). Collier (1967)
argued that photos can serve to represent buildings, neighborhoods, poverty, and dwellings more efficiently and vividly than written research. The idea and current use of photo elicitation is that photographs are integrated into the interview process (Harper, 1986). The photographs can be taken by the researcher or by the participant.

Research methods employing photography have been used in qualitative methods since the late 1950s (Collier, 1967). These methods, which include photo elicitation, photovoice, photo novella, autodriving, reflexive photography, and participant photography, all enable access to creativity and insight during the interview process by using cameras and photographs as a research tool (Cronin, 1998; Harper, 1986, 2002; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Hurworth, Clark, Martin & Thomsen, 2005; Prosser, 1998).

Several types of research methods include photography, which shall be identified here to maintain clarity before progressing further into this manuscript. Popular variations of qualitative (and sometimes quantitative) participant photography research methods that employ photographs include photo elicitation, autodriving, reflexive photographs, photo novella (‘picture stories’), and photovoice (Hurworth et al., 2005). Often used in health-related research, these methods help to gain a broader understanding of both marginalized populations and areas where an individual’s voice is made stronger through the utilization of photographs.

Photo elicitation. Primarily coined by Collier (1967) and Harper (1986) as a research method, photo elicitation is the idea, process, method, and product of including or inserting photographs into a research interview. As stated by Harper (2002):
The difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways we respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. This has a physical basis: the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information. Thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information. (p. 13)

Collier (1967) found that using images in research interviews sharpened the informants’ memory and reduced the areas of misunderstanding. Additionally, using photographs can produce longer and more detailed interviews but also maintained more energy and generation of new material than conventional interviews (see Harper, 2002).

Autodriving. Heisley and Levy (1991) coined the term autodriving to capture the essence of interviewees responding to the images of their behavior. The interview is “driven” by informants or interviewees who see their own behavior through images, typically taken by the researcher (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Hurworth et al., 2005). In a seminal work by Heisley and Levy (1991), photographs of family meals (which included the preparation and consumption of food) were photographed by the researcher. After developing the photos, family members examined the pictures and talked about family meals while viewing the photographs which captured their behavior. The family
members’ response is driven by their own life (Heisley & Levy, 1991) which aims to produce a more fruitful interview than typical interviewee self-report.

*Reflexive photographs.* This photograph research strategy provides participants with cameras with the direction to photograph a certain facet of life. In one study by Harrington and Lindy (1998), ten students were given disposable cameras and the direction to photograph their impressions of life and academic course work at a university. What resulted was considered a cross-cultural study due to the different university interactions students experienced and captured based on access. Data following reflexive interviews about these photos can reveal more than if a researcher merely asked a university student what their life was like. Additionally, future interviews can be based off previously taken photos, or the photos can be used repeatedly as reflexive photos (Hurworth et al., 2005).

*Photo novella.* According to Hurworth et al. (2005), photo novella translates into picture stories. Photo novellas use “photographs as a means of empowering (usually powerless) participants to create narratives about the events and routines that make up day-to-day existence” (Hurworth et al., 2005, p. 53). Unlike reflexive photography methods, participants of a photo novella research study possess a camera and take photographs of their daily lives. Photo novella methods put researchers:

into the hands of marginalized groups who normally have little access to those who make decisions over their lives. So, photo novella acts as a tool for collaboration, participatory and empowerment evaluations. It allows people with little money, power, or status, to document and discuss life conditions as they see
them in order to communicate to policy makers where change should occur.

(Hurworth et al., 2005, p. 54)

*Photo voice.* One form of participant action research highly valued for giving voice to marginalized populations and for influencing policy makers is photovoice (Keller et al., 2008; Wang, 1999). Photovoice is considered to be a method which empowers participants to take ownership and control over what knowledge is generated and how that knowledge is used (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). Photovoice studies include representations of individuals who are homeless (see Becker, 1998), refugees (see Hayden, 2006), or marginalized in some other societal fashion, such as the underrepresentation of Hispanic women who experience an abnormally high rate of long-term health risks (see Keller et al., 2008).

According to Keller et al. (2008), “photovoice is a method of capturing social and cultural knowledge, contextual strengths, and resources related to community-derived problems” (p. 429). Without the utilization of camera and photographs, the stories and experiences of certain populations would not be fully represented or shared. Photovoice creates a space for individuals to share their experiences and connections, situations and solutions in symbolic ways that stretch beyond written and spoken words (Keller et al., 2008). This is especially important when conventional or traditional research methods do not privilege or foster these individuals’ contributions. Photovoice is often employed to represent groups of people or communities who may be otherwise unable to explain or share their perspective. According to Wang (1999), photovoice has three main goals: to allow individuals to talk about a community’s issues, to promote critical dialogue through
group discussions of photographs, and as previously stated, to reach policy makers. Sometimes it takes the shocking images of an underserved population to grab the attention of people in a position to make a change.

Incorporating photos in qualitative research is perceived by many as a research method which balances the power dynamic between researcher and participant, interviewer and interviewee (Carlsson, 2001). When conducting research with an aim to promote empowerment and social justice, participant photography aids in producing a rich(er) description of experiences, stories, and perceptions (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005) by minimizing the power distance between the interviewer and interviewee (Carlsson, 2001). A strictly verbal interview can be an intimidating process, one which privileges quick mental wit and immediate response capabilities. In photo-based research, the interviewer has taken the form of facilitator and the emphasis can now be placed on the photograph and not the respondent. “In these approaches, the role of the researcher is often framed as that of a facilitator of knowledge creation, assisting stakeholders in discovering their own understandings that will aid them in creating change” (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005, p. 276). This can help reduce performance anxiety and uncertainty about what is expected of an interviewee, as well as taking pressure off the respondent and instead focusing together, with the researcher, on the photograph.

Numerous qualitative researchers in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and communication studies argue for the importance and relevance of participant photography action research (Carlsson, 2001; Collier, 1967; Harper, 1986; Stanczak, 2004). As argued by Stanczak (2004), photographic research methods as social scientific
research require an epistemological shift in thinking about images and meanings and usages. Image-based research uses photographic images to garner attention which hopefully results in action (Stanczak, 2004). Popular examples of this include now-iconic images of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression (Stanczak, 2004). These images, among others, create a lasting impression about issues that otherwise might not be as strongly remembered or historically captured. Images are sometimes etched into the memory differently than words due to the color, texture, contrast, or instant emotional impact photographs sometimes carry. Symbolically interacting with a photograph or image can be easier to do so than with writing because of the time and involvement it takes to read. Also, a photograph can render an experience meaningful in ways that can be directly viewed by others through the medium of a photo.

Carlsson (2001) posed a persuasive structure for implementing photographic research methods. She argued that photography is a helpful research tool, and can aid in understanding the ways people interact with and experience the world, through five main arguments: first, that new unconventional methods enhance educational inquiry; second, that photos can serve as communication bridges between strangers; third, that photography makes it easier to re-present a particular situation; fourth, that a photo can be regarded as a complex expression of a photographer’s relation to the world; and finally, that explanations of photos enhance expression of feelings (see Carlsson, 2001, pp. 126-131).

Applying Carlsson’s (2004) argument to understanding ways in which farming families understand their environmental connection to the earth and community allows
for a more creative and unstructured glimpse into their daily world. Providing farming families with disposable cameras and instructing them to capture their “job” and “life” as a farmer was (first) an unconventional method of research. Photos lent a different perspective of their experience that may not have been easily attained through in-depth interviews or participant observations. Because most interviews took place at kitchen tables, photos introduced me to parts of the farm that I otherwise would have never known existed. Interviews primarily occurred during the months of December and January, and the dormant land did not showcase what previously taken photos did.

Second, using photos to elicit discussion about farmer’s lives helped bridge communication between researcher and participants. This made potentially unproductive and uncomfortable interviews more insightful, productive, and illuminating. Several times during the interview process, both the researcher and interviewees reached for more photos when a lull in the conversation seemed to loom, and smooth conversation continued through the discussion of the photo. Third, photographing farmer’s daily lives and farming behaviors was a way to represent (or re-present) the particular situations in which farmers frequently found themselves. Asking a farmer, “What is it that you do in your job?” might not have garnered much of a detailed response. However, pointing to a photograph of a farmer using plastic clothes baskets to collect and clean lettuce in preparation for the local farmer’s market created an opportunity for increased participation and communication from the participants. The photos acted as a specific area on which to focus, which eased discussion and communication during an interview.
Fourth, a photo could be regarded as a complex expression of a photographer’s relation to the world by capturing an image or activity that could not otherwise be made accessible to a researcher. Some activities happened privately or in an area that a research simply could not access. By providing cameras to farming families, some photos revealed a more complex glimpse into the interviewee’s relationship to the earth, environment, and family. One photograph returned to me showed the private moment of a grandmother and grandchild napping together on a couch in the sunlight. As a researcher, I never would have been made privy to this intergenerational closeness.

Fifth and finally, explanations of photos enhanced expression of feelings and thoughts about the interviewee’s perspective on the world. By showing a participant a photograph and asking an open-ended question, the respondent could take creative control over the direction of the answer. An interviewee might be more open and expressive about a photograph that elicits a visceral response that a simple verbal question might not otherwise have accomplished (Carlsson, 2004). One photo displayed a large construction of solar panels next to an old, small shed. The juxtaposition of technology was brought up in the interview, and it was through the daughter looking at the picture that I learned the shed was built as a playhouse 50 years ago.

Participant photography action research methods often include group interviewing (Schwartz, 1989). In a study conducted by Schwartz (1989) focusing on the sociocultural continuity and change across generations in farm families, the researcher conducted interviews examining family photographs with several family members present, ranging multiple generations. Through this group interview process, participants fed off
comments made by others to co-construct their realities of what the farm means to them (Schwartz, 1989). The use of photographs to study inter-generational perspectives in a farming community created a space for individuals to engage with each other as well as the researcher to provide a rich description of what the farming community and culture meant (or didn’t mean) to each other.

Photo elicitation was the primary method proposed for studying farming families in the southeastern Ohio area. The rationale for this method was rooted in the belief that interviewing with photography potentially stimulated the interviewee, combated interviewee fatigue, relieved pressure, and balanced the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee (Carlsson, 2001; Collier & Collier, 1999; Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation in application with interviewing farmers assisted in getting people to talk about what could be a difficult or abstract topic, such as the nature of their work (Hurworth et al., 2005). As explained by Collier and Collier (1986),

Photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols. …It is often this characteristic that allows people to express their ethos while reading the photographs. …The one way we can use the full record of the camera is through the projective interpretation by the native. (p. 108)

When interviewing farmers in a farming community, there was the potential for limited communication or sharing on the part of the farmer, partly due to taken-for-granted knowledge about a farmer’s life. In choosing photo elicitation as an interviewing strategy, Harper (2000) posited that photo elicitation serves a purpose when attempting to understand more about a culture of which the researcher is an outsider. “Things taken for
granted by a cultural insider (which rules are followed, which norms guide behavior that is not regulated by rules, and what areas of social life lie primarily outside the perusal or rules) are not obvious to cultural outsiders” (Harper, 2000, p. 721).

Photo elicitation interviews boded well for successful interviews with farmers. As Harper (1986) explained, a photograph is easier to interpret and talk about than a verbal question which may or may not make sense to the interviewee. When the photograph becomes the focus of the discussion, the interviewee can quickly get a sense of what they have to offer the researcher and where their knowledge sets differ. “Seeing that the taken-for-granted, or the ‘commonplace’ is, in fact, not commonplace or taken-for-granted for the researcher encourages the subject to become the teacher about a reality which is abstracted and presented in the images” (Harper, 1986, p. 25). Harper (1986) continued: “The success of the photo-elicitation project is, in fact, often revealed in the wealth of information that emerges from images that the photographer might have considered, from his or her own cultural perspective, too ‘boring’ or ‘commonplace’ even to consider using” (p. 26). Communication between the researcher and informant is both bridged by the pictures and helps to show each other what knowledge sets are present and what is unknown, thus further reducing the power imbalance (Carlsson, 2001).

In a general photo elicitation overview by Harper (2002), interviews involving farmers can be assisted by aerial pictures of their farm, which help the farmers to see what is hardly visible from the ground level. “Having several aerial photographs of farms available in an interview encouraged farmers to discuss how and why they and their neighbors had chosen one strategy over another” (Harper, 2002, p. 20). Some of these
discussions and interview data might not have emerged had photographs not been employed to stimulate participation or thought.

An overarching methodological benefit of using photography to facilitate research interviews lies in the reflection and discussion within the interview process, where photos can serve as a “can opener” to reach rich information (Collier & Collier, 1986, p. 25). “Eliciting responses through images brings the “subject” into the research process as an interpreter or even an active collaborator rather than as a passive object of study” (Stanczak, 2004, p. 1473). In a study conducted on inter-generational sociocultural change and continuity of a farming community in Iowa, Schwartz (1989):

considered photographs inherently ambiguous, their specifiable meanings emergent in the viewing process… the multiple meanings negotiated by viewers can be mined for the rich data they yield. Building upon the evidence that viewers tend to look “through” photographs, I have made use of the ways in which photographs are routinely used by middle-class family viewers in order to elicit reactions and information concerning community life which might otherwise never become apparent. (p. 122)

For the purposes of studying family farming life through a communicative lens, Wagner (1979) illustrated the need for studies like this:

In the first place, there are too few visual studies of people acting in natural settings. We simply have not seen enough of what people do and the physical contexts in which it is done. In the second place, we know too little about how people themselves see the settings and their activities. Even when we have the
images of the people in the setting, we have little sense of what they make of it all or of the images themselves. (p. 286)

The analysis of photo elicitation interview transcripts contributed to the mixed methodological approach to studying farming families and their perspective of embodied environmental work. The photos used in the interview process were chosen based on parallels drawn from field notes (see Reissman, 2008). I organized data through data analysis of interview transcripts combined with analytical inferences drawn from field notes gathered during participant observation. Through using constant comparative method of data analysis, I read transcripts for any potential emergence of categorical themes and subsequent sub-themes (see Loeffler, 2004; Stage, 2003).

As Harper (2000) concluded, “the photograph is socially constructed in the sense that the social positions of the photographer and the subject come into play when a photograph is made; it takes social power to make a photograph” (p. 727). One limitation of using photo elicitation interviews is that not all the verities of life are going to be captured on film. While critical, explosive family fights about anything pertaining to the farm were not photographed and shared with me. The portrayal of family farm life was decided by the photographers, but the method of providing cameras to families who farm was still providing a more in-depth view and understanding of how farming families interact with their environmental than traditional verbal self-report interviews.

There was also the potential limitation of group interviews. Family members might have been pressured to answer in certain ways due to the presence of family. There is no way to know what family members chose to share or withhold, but interview
transcripts show numerous points of contention, conflict, and correction from other family members. However, it is the belief of the researcher that information created through dialogue with others during the interview produced richer interview data than protecting the privacy and sequestering family members during interviews, as the communication and collaboration of the interview process was monitored by the participants.

Throughout the data collection phase, a total of 235 pictures were taken by the participants, shared with me, and discussed during the interviews. The photographs captured by participants were taken on either 35mm disposable cameras provided to them by me, or digital photos previously taken that participants volunteered to share with me. Many families wanted to email photographs that showcased their farm in the height of the growing season or captured other proud moments for the farm.

During the interviews, the photographs served as a valuable tool to initiate dialogue with participants about their family and farming operation. I asked clarifying questions or made explanatory inquiries on approximately half of the photographs. The other half of the photographs were more self-explanatory and understandable to me, yet I incorporated them into the interviews to make sure I had an accurate interpretation. In many instances, participants had captured an image of something they were very proud of or really wanted to discuss with me. All 235 photographs shared with me were used in the interviews.

While in the field and at farms, I took an additional 85 photographs on my digital camera. While I did not use these photographs during the interviews, these photographs
helped to remind me of different aspects of each farm so I was more prepared for the interview upon arriving on a family farm. Without a doubt, I am confident that the incorporation of participatory photograph elicited a much richer interview and left with me a deeper understanding than would have occurred without the photographs.

*Participant Observations*

As one of the earliest and most basic forms of research in the social sciences (Adler & Adler, 1998), observational techniques for gathering research data is one of the most widely-used, especially in tandem with other forms of data collection. By entering an environment where the researcher is a non-native, observation is, at the core, a noting of the available naturalistic stimuli including sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste (Adler & Adler, 1998; Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Ethnographic observations are almost always possible only if the researcher enters the environment of the participants and gets close to the participants in their natural environment. However, the research’s role is not to drastically alter the natural environment when conducting participant observations.

“One of the hallmarks of observation has traditionally been its noninterventionism. Observers neither manipulate nor stimulate their subjects. They do not ask the subjects research questions, pose tasks for them, or deliberately create new provocations” (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 80).

For qualitative researchers, ethnographic observations are more detailed than merely looking around. Compared to the daily observations we make as we go through life, participant observations are more purposeful and systematic. As described by Weick
(1985), systematic observation is the “sustained, explicit, methodical observing and paraphrasing of social situations in relation to their naturally occurring contexts” (p. 569).

Of the many roles I adopted while observing in the field, I approached observations for this dissertation as “participant-as-observer” (Lindlof, 1995). As a ‘participant-as-observer’ I did not fully function as a member of a group but instead was involved as a participant with the open knowledge that I am there with the intent to gather data for research (Creswell, 2007; Lindlof, 1995). Through the observations at the farmer’s market(s), I purchased produce and food from vendors, talked to patrons, and interacted with people at the market. I participated in the activities of the market, but I did so with open consent and an awareness that “a transaction of interests is at the bottom of [my] participation” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 144). I recorded my observation time by the use of a research log (see Appendix D), and formal observation hours neared 100 during a five month period. Field notes were recorded within 36 hours of observation, and field notes and jottings filled three steno notepads throughout the course of the participant observations.

Formal participant observation was limited to opportunities of gatherings or farm work, of which there was limited access. The weekly farmer’s market afforded prime opportunities to observe and participate, but the market is only in session six hours per week. Additional areas of participant observation of farmers interacting included town hall meetings, festivals, conferences, and community dinners. As the farmers comprise an informal organization, there is no central office or location accessible to the public to observe and participate in like a traditional organization. The lack of structured
opportunities to observe farmers interacting were supplemented with informal participant observation.

In addition to formal participant observation, I lived in the field and interacted daily with the local community. I sought out restaurants and situations where farmers were reported to gather. The local restaurants in town which serve the local food were common places to see farmers, so I spent many hours eating and drinking at the locations which supported the local farmers. Through these informal observations, I accumulated an additional 50 hours of participant observations.

The product of participant observation, and thus the value of, comes from the writing of ethnographic field notes (Emerson, et al., 1995). Part of writing ethnographic field notes lies in creating descriptive and reflective field notes (Creswell, 2007). Descriptive field notes take into account the physical setting, events and activities (Creswell, 2007), and addresses the who, what, when, where, and why of an environment. Reflective field notes, on the other hand, are notes about the researcher’s experiences, hunches, reactions, thoughts, and learnings (Creswell, 2007, p. 134). Many of my reflective field notes were recorded on a handheld digital recording device and later transcribed. Since much of my observation required me to drive by automobile to the farm or location, the voice recorded afforded me the ability to speak about my thoughts, observations, and reflections immediately upon departing the farm without compromising my travel safety.

Through participating in order to write, ethnographers begin by taking note of initial impressions and move toward focusing on key events or incidents (Emerson, et al.,
Throughout this process, I believed it was important for researchers to keep note of their own involvement and response to environmental stimuli. As explained by Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (2001),

Some field researchers consider fieldnotes to be writings that record both what they learn and observe about the activities of others and their own actions, questions, and reflections. But others insist on a sharp distinction between records of what others said and did – the ‘data’ of fieldwork – and writings incorporating their own thoughts and reactions. Some of these ethnographers view only the former as fieldnotes and consider the latter as personal ‘journals’ or ‘diaries’; others hold a diametrically opposed view and contrast fieldnotes with data, speaking of fieldnotes as a record of one’s reactions, a cryptic list of items to concentrate on, a preliminary stab at analysis, and so on’. (p. 354, original emphasis)

I approached fieldnotes through observations as a time for jotting both descriptive and reflective observations. For my research and the subsequent reflexivity, I monitored both my involvement in the field and my observations about what I saw. I did not believe I could extract my perspective from my notes, so I remained cognizant of my role and situational context within the larger frame of the observational field.

In-depth Interviews

My approach to qualitative methods is driven in part by the belief that my role is to attempt to give voice to others’ life stories, experiences, perspectives, and ways of understanding. In order to engage in what I consider sensemaking research, which is to
learn more about the ways people make sense of their experiences, my job was to facilitate the investigation of another’s experience, not to be the single author. By so desiring the voice and vision of others, interviewing as a research method offered facilitation and creation of a space to allow others to share their stories and experiences, and to “derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk” (Warren, 2002, p. 83). In this dissertation, in-depth semi-structured ethnographic respondent interviews were used (Lindlof, 1995).

As stated by Warren (2002), “Interview participants are more likely to be viewed as meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers” (p. 83; taken from Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). In order to access the ways in which farmers make meaning of their practices and cultural values, I engaged in semi-structured in-depth ethnographic interviews (Lindlof, 1995). The ethnographic interview appears as an informal conversation that may or may not appeared to have a specific beginning or end (Van Maanen, 1981). This type of interview is common throughout participant observation, where a series of defined questions are not present, and instead a flowing conversation takes place between researcher and participant. The respondent interview “elicits open-ended responses to a series of directive questions” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 171) which was not exactly what I was striving for, but there were interactions with farmers and vendors where I sought to accumulate specific data. In these situations, respondent interviews were appropriate.

In order to connect with farming families, I wanted to use in-depth interviews to help immerse myself in their stories and perspectives, and intended to use the
photographs as power-balancing props (see Appendix E and F for interview schedules).

As stated by Johnson (2001),

As the name implies, in-depth interviewing seeks “deep” information and understanding. The word depth has several meanings in this context. First, deep understandings are held by the real-life members of or participants in some everyday activity, event, or place. The interviewer seeks to achieve the same deep level of knowledge and understanding as the members or participants. …In this respect, the informant would be a kind of teacher and the interviewer a student, one interested in learning the ropes or gaining member knowledge from a veteran informant. (p. 106, original emphasis)

To engage with participants in a way that empowered them to be the educator and me the student possibly gave access to what was otherwise an impenetrable world. To use Tripp’s (1983) approach to “co-authorship” interviews, I wanted to hear the voice and influence of the participants in order to learn more about their experiences and values. The “co-authorship” interviewing procedure was “an attempt to objectify subjectivity through a research strategy which recognizes and acts upon the power relationship between the researcher and the researched” (p. 32).

When interviewing farmers, I operated on my lived experiences of understanding farmers to be solitary, independent, internally-minded individuals who may or may not be verbose in explaining their farming practices. For the purposes of this study, I was correct. Some farmers were quiet and reticent to share until encouraged; other farmers needed no encouragement to openly share their opinions and experiences. Part of the
rationale for using photographs in in-depth interviewing was to create an opportunity for farmers and their families to focus on photographs that they took in order to convey their farming life. The photos were meant as a diversion of attention away from the participants themselves, and also gave me more freedom in asking questions about what I saw in the pictures. This form of in-depth interviewing might have relieved tension and created a space for participants to feel comfortable and for the researcher to see a more genuine and less monitored side of the participants. Regardless, every interview conducted in this study lasted at least 90 minutes and some went as long as 150 minutes. In most cases, the researcher had to gently end the interview after it appeared as though there was no end in sight.

I anticipated conducting interviews with “enough” families until I felt I had reached saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Johnson, 2001). My advisor, Dr. Scott Titsworth, had proposed 10 family interviews as a good starting point, and this amount turned out to be sufficient. In the end, 9 family interviews were conducted, along with 5 community members and leaders, for a total of 14 interviews.

**Document Analysis**

To continue with the goal of crystallization, I employed document analysis as a methodological tool to gain insight from a different perspective. When paired with other research methods, organizational documents obtained through participant observation and research were shown to increase the overall understanding of a certain phenomenon (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). To prevent underestimating the power and weight of documents, Lindlof (1995) explained the purpose (and subsequent value) of documents
by recognizing that, “documents indicate, among other things, what an organization produces and how it certifies certain kinds of activities, categorizes events or people, codifies procedures or policies, instructs a readership, explains past or future actions, and tracks its own activities” (p. 208, original emphasis).

Lindlof (1995) continued to explain the three main contributions documents lend to the larger research data-gathering methodology. Documents may be part of the unspoken language among natives, documents can help to construct understanding of historic events that currently influence social interaction, and documents can sometimes provide insight to the governing rules of an organization (Lindlof, 1995).

For this study, the documents I analyzed included Athens Farmer’s Market literature and newspaper articles; memos given to local food group meeting participants, PowerPoint slides presented at community meetings, handouts gathered from local businesses in town advertising and promoting local food, and fliers from meetings and community gatherings. Organizational websites and written documents created to support local food economies were accessed through joining a local foodshed social networking website, Facebook, and online forums dedicated to discussions about the local and global food economy. Documents, while perhaps not the weightiest of research methodologies, offered background insight into local food systems history, the vision and mission of local organizations aiding and promoting local food systems, organizational aid to family farmers in the local area, and the personal perspectives of community members and activists.
Data Analysis

I anticipated a large amount of data to accumulate through participant observations, transcribed interviews, fieldnotes, photographs, and documents. According to Creswell (2007), data analysis and representation for ethnographies and grounded theory studies include data managing through creating and organizing files for data; reading and memoing through text, making notes in margins, and forming initial codes; describing open coding categories and the social setting, actors, events; classifying by analyzing data for themes and patterned regularities; interpret the data to make sense of the findings, or “how the culture works” (p. 157); and representing and visualizing by presenting a narrative presentation of the research data.

To apply Creswell’s (2007) data analysis and representation approach, I engaged in multiple close readings of texts, transcripts, and notes, all while making jottings of initial impressions. I strived to use thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to describe the setting and environment as accurately as possible. In addition to classical interpretive data analysis methods, I engaged in photograph analysis from a researcher and participant perspective. I approached the photographs taken by participants as another way of “knowing” about their farming and family experiences, and compared my initial interpretation of their photographs to their explanations.

I continuously and actively classified the data by analyzing the data through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to notice any emerging themes or patterned regularities. Specifically, I read and re-read interview transcripts while utilizing large wipe boards as a place to create flexible organizational
patterns of the data. As I collected more data, I moved elements and pieces of data around on the wipe boards to visualize the emergent themes. Explained by Boje (2001), the function of the constant comparative method is to “do the ethnographic data collection, coding and analysis as you go, rather than to collect a lot of observations, interviews or surveys then code it once and for all to prove or disprove a deductive hypothesis” (p. 51). As Boje (2001) also stated, data by itself is without meaning, and much like the meaning we assign to words, the data is waiting to be infused with meaning. The constant comparative method of data analysis provides a systematic way to be continually checking the data.

The final stages of data analysis included interpreting the data to make sense of the findings and to gain a sense of how the cultural values in farming families were constructed and enacted. I represented the data by relying on narrative presentation of the data and the “unique and general features of life” (Creswell, 2007, p. 157). As part of the data analysis, I relied on the photographs taken by the participants as a way of knowing and learning about their culture and life. The photographs taken and shared by the participants afforded me the opportunity to interpret the photographs with their input and contributions to create the most accurate representation possible.

Much of the rigor in qualitative research is derived from the synergy of multiple methods. When conducting participant observations, there is a risk of observer effects (Adler & Adler, 1998), but not as much as is perhaps present with interviewing. Whereas the argument could be made that observational field notes are not as rigorous as other forms of inquiry, the rigor emerges when observations are combined with other methods.
Through this dissertation, the approach of crystallization (Ellingson, 2009) strengthened and informed the other modes of inquiry to result in a more holistic picture and rich description.

Summary

Through these employed methods, I strived to represent the experiences and perspectives of family farmers in a way that honored their contributions but also made transparent my role in the research and the writing. To keep my voice present is not to diminish their voice, but to keep the reader aware that I in no way, shape, or form believe my interpretation to be the sole, imperious understanding of their lives. The following chapter illustrates the data collected throughout this dissertation with emergent themes and my interpretation, followed by a discussion.
CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

The “family farm” has become a political catchword, like democracy and
Christianity, and much evil has been done in its name. ...The term “family farm”
[refers to] a farm small enough to be farmed by a family and one that IS farmed
by a family. The family farm is both the home and the workplace of the family that
owns it. The critical points, in defining “family farm,” are that the amount of
nonfamily labor should be small and that it should supplement, not replace,
family labor. We must allow for the possibility that a family farm might be very
small or marginal and that it might not entirely support its family. In such cases,
though the economic return might be reduced, the values of the family-owned and
family-worked small farm are still available both to the family and to the nation.

(Berry, 1986; 2009, pp. 31-33)

The politics of food has been the reoccurring theme throughout this project. While
I tried to make sense of my data and understand how the farmers’ stories contributed and
connected to an understanding of family farming, I realized that good food, in and of
itself a commodity, was understood and interpreted differently across people and
organizations. The politics of food quickly became the politics of good food. Organic
farmers have a very clear definition of what makes food good for the body and
environment, whereas conventional farmers interpret good food to be food produced in
quantities large enough to supply reasonably priced food to all. The government also
plays a role in understanding the contested meaning of good food through the
implementation of the bureaucratic structures guiding agricultural production and
distribution. The overall results from this study aim to capture the contested meanings of
good food.

The traditional hierarchical and alternative ways of structuring organizations
provide organizational communication scholars with a lens to look at ways people
organize themselves and how people communicate within organizations (Rothschild-
Whitt, 1979). An exploration of an organization’s culture (Beyer & Trice, 1987) and the
members’ identification (Cheney & Thompkins, 1987) can also lend insight into an
organization’s structure. Interestingly, a visible or even informal organizational
communication structure was absent between the farmers who participated in this study.
Recent communication research on alternative forms of organizing, such as cooperative
support organizations, brings us closer to understanding the communication between
informal and independent groups of people (Harter & Krone, 2001; Harter, 2004; Mumby
& Stohl, 1996). However, questions asked in this study, such as how do family farms
organize themselves to create a local food system, remain unanswered through the
application of alternative or traditional hierarchical organizational communication
structures.

This study attempts to construct and explain paradoxes experienced by farming
families. Treating the local farming economy of a small Appalachian town as a form of
alternative organizing allows examination of and analysis of democratic and participative
principles endemic to how culture is developed and maintained within this loosely
organized community. Farming has been considered a productive or economic type of
organization concerned with providing goods and services to the public, but little is known from an organizational communication perspective how farming families collaborate with other entities to succeed and create community economies such as farmers markets (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Many results of this study articulate the tensions, paradoxes, and constraints experienced by farming families. How these tensions are constructed and managed is of particular interest in the attempt to understand more about the challenges this specific set of farmers face.

The pervasive theme of food and the politics associated with the growing, harvesting, transporting, processing, marketing, selling, purchasing, and consuming food was present in every single meeting, interview, and document used as my data set. As one of my interviewees simply stated, “Everyone has to eat.” An undeniable and elemental part of life, food and the politics surrounding food only became more important to me as a consumer and individual as I progressed through my research and reflected on my own experiences growing up in a farming family. The extent to which farming families in Appalachia existentially, literally, and emotionally feel tensions and paradoxes, hope and despair, and promise of the future pitted against the damage of the past regarding good food went much deeper than I had initially thought.

Much like following nature’s cycle of ‘womb-to-tomb’ or ‘plow-to-plate,’ I began to see a trajectory of how politics, bureaucracy, and democracy affects farmers on a local scale in Appalachia and the subsequent identification of participants to the vocation of farming. This, in turn, cycles directly into the politics of what is on your dinner plate. The concept of good food persistently echoed throughout interviews with family members and
was a central theme of many civic meetings. Various interpretations of ‘good’ food had deep roots connected to family, which I considered highly influential toward the shaping of the farm’s organizational culture. Many participants discussed foods they ate during their childhood. Some participants identified strongly with certain aspects of their perceptions of good food, including stressing to me how healthy their diet was, while others were ambivalent about their daily meals and showed no significant amount of identification to the culture of good food.

*Good food* was explained to me at several points during this research project: a mission statement at a bakery renouncing genetically modified food; food produced in conventional ways that provided farmers a substantial income and supported multiple generations; food grown without the use of chemicals; food grown with the use of genetically-modified seeds and sold at a cheaper price; food grown organically so as to create healthier soil; food produced and sold within a 200-mile radius; food that specifically did not come from Wal-Mart; foods which did not contribute to the making of high-fructose corn syrup; foods that were not processed; food that kept hungry children from starving; food that pleased the nation’s population and appetite. The explanations, interpretations, and opinions surrounding *good food* became more and more contested as participants described the food situation in the nation and world generally, and in Appalachia specifically. The issue of good food provided a basis for understanding how the farming families of Appalachia who participated in this study (who all operate on a small scale) understand the politics of farming, environmentalism, and their own identity as farmers. By analyzing how public discourse defines *good* food, the political
involvement of farming and food emerged more and more strongly as the definition of good food became more contested.

The issue of scale was repeatedly explained to me when talking with farmers. Small farmers view large farming operations and the government as overwhelming competition; other farmers view corporate involvement as a betrayal of moral rights. The discussion around the issue of scale included the capabilities of a farm, money received from the government, and attention to whose interests were being privileged. Large-scale farming, encouraged by the USDA since the 1970s, receives more federal aid than small-scale farming which comprises the majority of agriculture in Appalachia. Large scale farming, additionally, carries more political weight in part due to the dual-role of agribusiness corporate board members and government officials in the USDA, FDA, and EPA. Dewey (1927) provides a theoretical foundation to understand the conflict of interest arising when private interests (such as that of corporate shareholders) influence democratic principles. This conflict of interest, as explained by Dewey (1927), is complicated by the multiple roles individuals play in both a public and a private sense: ultimately, when an individual plays a societal role that affects the general public, his or her private role becomes public, and it is the individual task to place the good of the public over the good of the individual. The contested meaning of good food is enacted when the public perceives wrongful doing in the food sector by private corporations and powerful individuals, such as subsidizing processed food (from companies like Kraft and General Mills) which has been linked to health problems for children and adults including childhood obesity and early-onset diabetes (Warner, 2005).
The political nature of food, resounding throughout the findings of this dissertation, emerged in different ways, shapes, and forms. In talking with farmers and their families, I noticed how government and corporate involvement was brought up by participants in every single interview – some positively, some negatively. Many farmers perceived the control of money and research as the root of many farm, food, and environmental problems. Some farmers viewed the grant money and involvement of government inspectors as the direct benefit of federal support at a local level. However, an ultimate disconnect between the government and the farmers in Appalachia emerged in the interviews. James, a farm educator, explained his perception of how a majority of our options and problem solving abilities are limited by what corporations offer the public through research:

James: Part of this problem is that it’s all in the hands of the corporation. They control the budget. They control the research agenda. As we’ve lost funding for state research to land grant universities and other public universities, researchers have had to find funding from other sources. And those sources are private corporations. They give money for research, yes, but they control the research agenda by saying, “This is what we want you to look at, this is what we want you to evaluate.” So, for example, the weed science program at Ohio State doesn’t have trials out on cultivating the corn; it’s all chemicals because their dollars are coming from chemical companies to test the different chemicals, and it’s the same with biotech. Monsanto is controlling that whole area of biotech in the traits going into the corn. Instead of developing biotech that could be good and eliminate the
need for chemicals and synthetic fertilizers, Monsanto and the big corporations
don’t want it. They make tons of money selling fertilizer, selling chemicals, so
there’s no incentive for them to develop those things that could really help the
public out. So, who controls the research agenda ultimately determines what
direction agriculture is going in. So, again, the folks in this county look at that and
they’re suspicious of big corporations which they rightly should be, because of
that research agenda. And they say, okay, we’re gonna go another path.

James recounted stories of farmers trying to take alternative paths that allow them
to farm without using inputs and seed from agribusiness companies such as Monsanto,
DeKalb, and Pioneer. The farmers in the Appalachian area are outliers in this sense. The
politics of food might begin with the control of research and money, but the role of
money and corporate control continues throughout the beginning of the chain to the
consumer. As one farming family explained their story, the awareness of corporate
involvement in their farming operation and access to local diet staples became a glaring
sign of the politics of growing and consuming ‘good’ food:

Mary: The story we repeat over and over again is the one of going to markets and
loving to get fresh veggies and fresh fruit but then realizing that we have to go
somewhere else for the real bulk of our diet. John was working as a farm
apprenticeship in California, I was out there, and I was like, “How come nobody’s
Growing grains, beans, and oil seeds?” And then digging deep into it we could see
that there was a very political issue in answering that question. Who has power?
Who holds the power and the control over those food stuffs? And how those food
stuffs are changing. You know, people who promote that GMOs [Genetically Modified Organisms] are going to save the world, that that they’re better for us, are not talking about how they’re using GMO to actually change the structure of the plant and their nutritive value. Like corn, being a much bigger starch component than the heirloom corns have which have a lot bigger germ; and bigger starch means more corn syrup. So, it’s a political thing. Just like they’re changing the structure of the plant, they are changing the structure of our agricultural economy.

Dewey (1927) articulated how the public and democratic state is made up of a collection of individuals. Within a democratic state, individuals may have competing desires, and as Dewey (1927) explained,

The dual capacity of every officer of the public leads to conflict in individuals between their genuinely political aims and acts and those which they possess in their non-political roles. When the public adopts special measures to see to it that the conflict is minimized and that the representative function overrides the private ones, political institutions are termed representative. (p. 76-77)

The United States is made up of a collection of individuals who, we hope, keep our best interests in mind. However, many of the representatives in the government also play a role as an executive within a private for-profit corporation. Incorporating Dewey (1927) into the model of government and corporate representatives as serving dual roles, the desire of profit and income sometimes supersedes the desire to retain cultural and moral
values that are a cornerstone of farming. As stated by James, the farm educator, corporations are geared to focus on profit:

James: Corporations aren’t designed to look long term. Corporations look at the next quarter profit and earnings. They are a pile of money that wants to get bigger, and cultural values in those kinds of things don’t come into play; and we used to be dependent upon the people in those corporations to control and have some moral values and direct it. But then we gave corporations itself rights now, as a person, so the corporation itself is considered a person (even though it’s not), so the overriding objective of that corporation is just to make money and not consider long-term consequences. So we’ve done this to ourselves with some of our laws and regulations.

The initial theme, “It’s fucking independence!”: *The democratization of farming*, addresses the fundamental role of how government, bureaucratic processes, corporations, and legislation converge and contribute to how family farmers understand, enact, and explain the politics and contested meanings of good food. As government and private corporations currently control most of the farming through subsidies and research agendas, the illusion of freedom and independence regarding our food is politically shifting from small farmers to big business.

The second theme, “The meek shall inherit the earth”: *Appalachia and the Politics of Family Farming*, explores how the global, regional, and local infrastructures contribute to the experiences, histories, futures, and mythic stereotypes of small farming families. For centuries, small family farming has been seen as a politically-independent
and humble occupation. Now more than ever, farming is political. Farmers inescapably are making political statements by virtue of their chosen growing methods.

“I’m not a farmer yet. Just learning.”: Negotiating Agricultural Identity is the third theme, which ties together the global and local contributions to understanding the work of farmers. The third theme examines identification of farmers, processes of socialization into farming, and the social influences surrounding what it means to farm (Giddens, 1979). As genetic modification techniques and technological processes infiltrate farming, the identity of a farmer is shifting, and with it a powerful political vote is cast. The wholeness of the farming identity is specifically explored, as the name, label, and foci of the title takes on more meaning than simply the task of farming (Cheney, 1983a).

The first three themes bring us to food and the ways in which we are interconnected or disconnected to and through food. The fourth theme, “Everybody has to eat”: The past, present, and future of food, focuses on the trials, tribulations, and experiences of farming families in the quest to grow, sell, and consume good food. With the increasing government regulations regarding food, access to local types of food is becoming more limited while access to corporate food is becoming easier. The future of food depends heavily on regional farming strategies and government regulation of farming.

The last theme, “We live with a bunch of freaks around here!”: Communities thinking globally and acting locally, represents the role family farmers play in relation to the neighboring community, town, county, state, and nation. By collaborating and
communicating with the different entities that play a role in our food value chain, a network is woven that highlights the interconnectedness of farmers and our nation’s food sources as well as the disconnect between the public and the source of food.

Pervading the themes are the voices of the farming family members, community leaders, and concerned citizens. Direct quotes are taken from interviews in an effort to present the voices of participants by using their wording. Pseudonyms were given to ensure anonymity. As per qualitative research results, the discourse of participants is presented in a descriptive, narrative form to most closely relay and maintain the ownership of the stories and experiences of others (Creswell, 2003).

“It’s fucking independence!”: The Democratization of Farming

The politics of farming and food pervade many aspects of the food chain and bureaucratic process. The politics of food can be understood in examining the paradoxes and tensions arising through the dialogue of farmers as they make sense of the tensions and conflicts they face when negotiating their growing practices. This broad dialectical tension of independence and control presented itself, in some way, in every interview (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The first theme focuses specifically on the democratization of farming and control exerted by the government while farmers struggle for independence. Dewey’s (1927) model of an interfaced government, public, and community provides a backdrop for examining independence and control, the central tension in this theme. While all participants shared different perspectives of their interaction with government agencies and the (illusion of) freedom their job affords them,
the consensus was that these farmers want to re-balance this tension on the side of
independence, while the government wants to balance on the side of control.

Through exploring the role government, the public, communities, and money
plays in shaping the viability of farming and the current state of our food economy, a
framework is created to understand the politics of food in a democratic society. This first
theme analyzes tensions felt by individual families between government and
corporations. I strive to analyze how bureaucratic and individualized entities try to define
good food, and how those contested meanings and interpretations affect family farms.

The politics of food these days are such that farming is no longer just farming.
The mythic perception of the simple agrarian lifestyle (Rushing, 1983) or that of a “dumb
farmer” is a thing of the past, and earning a living by farming is become more and more
tethered to the bureaucratic system. Essentially, the role of the individual farmer and the
role of government are defined by the perception of good food. Whereas the definition of
good food is contested, conflicts and tensions emerge and are felt by these farming
families in Appalachia.

I spent a great deal of time talking with John and Mary, a farming family who
grows grains and oil seeds in an attempt to become less reliant on the global food chain
for the bulk of their diet. For John and Mary, food grown outside of a 300-mile radius
from their present latitude and longitude is considered globally sourced and simply too
far away to create a sustainable pattern of consistent consumption. When I asked why
they chose to grow alternative grains such as amaranth, buckwheat, millet, and cornmeal,
John immediately exclaimed, “It’s fucking independence!” Mary elaborated,
Mary: Because it’s protein, it’s calories, it’s nutrition, it’s the bulk of our diet. We could actually live without lettuce. But we can’t live without fiber and protein and all the other things that are in these crops. What we’re getting is very over-processed food from those crops if we go into the grocery store. And we can get stuff from elsewhere that is organic and grown right, but you know when oil is $300 a barrel, we’re not gonna get the good stuff from far away either. It just seemed like it’s time to figure that out – why figure it out when the tidal wave is visible? I mean, it’s kind of visible, but like, right over our heads. Maybe we have a few years to figure out how to grow these things so we can grow them.

John calmly added, “It doesn’t need to be alarmist, it’s just common sense.” Mary perceives good food as minimally-processed food not transported across the country. Mary’s concern with the price of oil contributes to her concern and sense of urgency to provide necessary diet staples for herself and her community; food which is ethically-grown and organic may be grown in California but the 3,000 food miles attached to the price tag for organic flour is simply too expensive for Mary.

The desire for independence among Appalachian farmers is not just with the food situation. As one farmer explained to me, he wants to rely as little as possible on the government. Sources of energy is an area of contention among farmers, and many farmers are applying for grants that award monies to homeowners who install solar panels. As shown in Image 1, this farmer installed solar panels on his farm. The solar panels in Image 1 are juxtaposed next to an old garden shed. The combined desires to use less, rely less on the government, leave a smaller carbon footprint, and preserve the old
while progressively moving toward the future were just some of the colliding values farmers mentioned wrestling with in an effort to farm most judiciously.

Image 1. Solar panels on Appalachian family farm.

The subthemes within exploring the democratization of farming include the role of government, the public, community, and money. Specifically, the subtheme of independence versus control resonates amongst farming families as they try to assert their independence while constrained by bureaucratic control. This reoccurring tension is manifested in several ways. For example, in November 2009, a state-wide ballot proposed an amendment to create a government board to control livestock and poultry.
regulations. This issue passed in a nearly-unanimous vote: every county in the state voted yes except the county where the majority of these participants farmed. As printed in a local newspaper, “Vote no on Issue 2, an unnecessary power grab by big ag. The proposal is a thinly veiled attempt to prevent future democratic efforts to strengthen our state’s weak system of livestock-protection laws” (Staff, 2009, p. A1). The amendment passed and a board is currently being formed to increase regulations of livestock and poultry, much to the chagrin of local farmers. The desire for freedom in farming is strongly curtailed by democratic forces regulating agriculture. This is yet another example of how good food is contested even at a state and local level.

Another example of ways the independence versus control tension manifests itself was found in a customer newsletter published by a local bakery. Sitting by the cash register at a local bakery, the newsletter reported their yearly earnings and broke down the “investments” made in the local economy. Defining ‘good’ food as local and free of corporate control, the bakery newsletter itemized their yearly business which included, “$43,000 invested in local organic produce. $30,000 invested in locally raised pork, beef, lamb, chicken, and eggs. $290,000 total investment in local and sustainable food and gifts. $0.00 invested in Wal-Mart, Sysco, GFS, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Altria, or Monsanto.” This newsletter illustrates the tensions felt by local businesses and farmers between independence and control by celebrating a successful local food system not tethered to some of the biggest food and agriculture companies.

The state was defined by Dewey (1927) as being the arbiter of conflict among social institutions, (e.g., farmers and corporations), or the arbiter of conflicts involving
money. The government’s role in family farming includes the United States Department of Agriculture and the creation of farming regulations and policies, assistance and subsidy distribution, and certification rules for farming. As I spoke with participants about their definitions and interpretations of good food, I began to more clearly see how conflict regarding the contested meanings of good food emerged between small family farmers and large government institutions. Currently, the meaning of good food is simply too heavily contested between farmers who value locally-sourced food and a healthy environment versus the corporations and government institutions that value bottom-line profits and cheap food accessible to all, regardless of production means.

While many government policies are created to protect both citizens and producers, many farmers reported to me that they found the regulations to be frustrating and difficult. Roy, a conventional farmer, shared with me his understandings and frustrations regarding government regulations. Roy believes that government involvement in farming is necessary and beneficial to the public, but a line exists between consumer safety and over-regulation of farming practices. For Roy, the politics of growing good food becomes more burdensome than perhaps necessary:

Roy: We have to have some type of regulation, somebody has to regulate, and somebody has to police it. Like an organic farmer, there is policing for that. When you pay your $600 or $700 a year [for the organic certification], that’s policing. They [the government] can come out and spot check. We have the same thing in the meats. Can it always be better? Yeah. Do we have the money to regulate and police it the way we want to? No. But overregulation for both small and large
farmers is a reoccurring problem. Farmers do everything we can to stop unnecessary over-regulation. Regulation is fine! As long as it’s not over-regulated. If you knew what I had to go through to get a pesticide license, Oh my God! The pesticide license; you have to study and take a test to get a license so you can buy certain pesticides. And it’s damned hard. And you have to study about a foot of manuals. And you have to know it all. You can’t be a dummy to be doing this. And every time I spray something, I have to fill out an 8 ½”x11” form. State law says that I’m supposed to. And I know it’s to protect the farmer and it’s protecting the consumer, too. They time harvest intervals from spring, every chemical has an EPA regulation number on it. Because you have to put that number down on paper. How much you used. How much water you used. When you sprayed. What the weather was. Blah blah blah blah! So, if somebody buys something from me at the farmer’s market, and you have five people who get sick, then here comes the health department, they are investigating, here comes the Department of Agriculture, they come investigating. Everybody gets sick from peaches. Hmmmm. “Where did you get your peaches?” This guy at the market. Then they come to me. The government asks me, “What did you put on those peaches?” And I show them on paperwork, “Here’s what I put on those peaches. It’s totally legal.” I’ve never had something like that happen, but the state Department of Agriculture can come to you at any point and say, “I want to see your records for spraying.” Keeping those records is a bitch! It’s the last thing you
want to do when you get done spraying at 9 o’clock at night is fill out a damn form!

Farming regulations implemented by the government have been more strenuous for organic farmers than conventional farmers, but Roy’s story shows us that all farmers, both organic and conventional, are starting facing increasing accountability. Regulations for organic farmers are presently still much more stringent than those applied to conventional farmers. The process of organic certification was explained by Carol and Mark, who own and operate an organic farm. Carol takes care of the majority of paperwork and Mark works at implementing the standards for organic certification as mandated by the government. During a discussion at their kitchen table, they explained to me the typical organic certification process:

Carol: Some people don’t get certified organic, because, ‘Oh, it’s so much paperwork, it’s so much recordkeeping, it’s so expensive, and that’s why I don’t do it.’ But the whole thing is, now it’s coming down to where everybody has to keep strict records, everybody has to have traceability for every aspect from the seeds to the soil to the fertilizer – to everything, because of the food scares that have occurred, the spinach scares. And the tomato scare. And the peanut butter scare. So, our consumers are really demanding where their food comes from because of all the scares. They are thinking, “I don’t want to take a chance and eat spinach, even though it’s healthy for me, and get E. coli.” And, “Should I feed my kids this?” “And my grandparents?” And it’s because who knows what will happen. But it’s getting to that point where all the things we do with the organic
process that we have to do anyway, because of regulations and different legislation that is occurring. So all in all, it’s something that farmers should be doing.

Mark: And another problem with it, for someone just starting up a farm, is the cost of it. This year the certification is $650, which, how many heads of lettuce am I going to have to sell just to cover that cost? But they [the government] do allow you to reimburse up to like ¾ of it, so you could get it down to about $250. Originally when it started it was like $50, but they send someone out once a year to do a farm tour check, they go through the application, we have an inspection, and then they have their own people going through and checking out just verifying and being double-checked.

Carol: We have an inspection process, so after we mail in the application form, they schedule so many months later an inspector to come out. And then he or she, the inspector, goes over the whole application, and you do more research, and then you go out actually to the fields and the different gardens, and go over everything.

Mark: And they can come in at any point in time, during any season, and say, “Okay, we want to do it now.” Without even notifying you.

Carol: Which is what it should be. And I know a lot of customers ask me, “Oh, well you’re organic, but are you really organic?” Yes, we are organic.

Carol and Mark believe in the organic certification system and regularly educate the public about what organic certification entails and the rigor of the certification process.
However, some farmers who choose not to go through the official certification process do so with success. Dwight, an organic farmer who is not certified, explained his rationale in abdicating the organic certification:

I’m not certified organic, but I follow organic principles. I came to this from the environmental movement. I studied ecology in college, and botany, and I was into the environmental movement, so this was just the natural thing to do. I never would have considered doing the chemical route. So, we’ve always farmed organically, more or less. We were certified for a few years, back in the ‘90s. But it wasn’t practical for our operation, so we no longer get certified, but continue to farm basically the organic methods. People we have at the farmer’s market ask me if I’m organic, and I say, “No I’m not certified,” and they don’t care. They’re coming to the market because they want local food. And I think local should take priority over organic.

As the local food movement gains popularity across the nation, the issues of sustainability and food miles become part of the discussion. In nearly all of my conversations with farmers, the issue of poverty and government aid was mentioned. By either desiring to feed people, helping people become healthier or giving people healthier option, farmers remain aware of the government’s role in supplying food to families who are food insecure. Barb and Ron, a local farming family, opined about government’s role in controlling poverty while corporations run the farming economy into the ground with the “fallacy of capitalism”: 

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Barb: This whole idea of more, more, more for free is, it’s the way to keep the poor from rebelling. People who are well-fed will not break out their guns and knives and rakes and hoes and weapons.

Ron: People are so vested. Corporations are so vested in the food stamp program. Look to see who, how, the corporations are the biggest advocates of the food stamp program of anybody. The food corporations. They are the biggest advocates of food stamp programs.

Barb: And they could be doing such a better job with their products. Their greed and their need to see that bottom line always, always growing has caused them to look for cheaper and cheaper less whole additives. Things that are cheaper and cheaper to make instead of, and I don’t know the names of the chemicals so I can’t really give you examples, but the whole fallacy of capitalism is that everybody needs, everybody wants to have more money, every year. In fact, they feel entitled to more money every year. They feel they need that because prices have gone up every year. And prices have gone up every year because the supplies for producing the products have gone up every year. And so there’s this constant up, up, up. You can never simply say, ‘Okay. We’re as big as we need to be.’ I’m not sure you can be sustainable. Because in my mind, if you’re sustainable, you’re at the size that this farm will be able to support. It can’t get any bigger than it is and stay sustainable.

Ron: I think that if consumption became localized more, then sustainable, if you were dealing in community, then sustainability is much easier to achieve.
Part of what Carol and Ron were disgruntled about revolved around the changes that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily involving United States secretary of agriculture Earl Butz. Butz served under Presidents Nixon and Ford as secretary of agriculture from 1971 to 1976 (Barnett, 2000). During that time, Butz encouraged farmers to ‘get big or get out’ and was a proponent for covering all farm land in corn and other commodity crops (Cheney & Ellis, 2007). As Carol stated, “Earl Butz is the worst thing that ever happened to farming. Let me just say that right there.” Earl Butz was pro-agribusiness and urged Midwestern farmers to buy as much land as possible during the 1970s, which directly contributed to the crash of farming in the early 1980s. Butz also served as a board member on several agri-business firms including Ralston-Purina (Philpott, 2008). Exactly as Dewey (1927) foreshadowed, Butz came under scrutiny and criticism that his corporate ties might be a conflict of interest and compromise his role and performance as United Stated Department of Agriculture chief (Philpott, 2008). As Butz continued on his quest to develop a fast-food nation, he pushed commodity crops and changed the way commodity pricing affected farmers, which resulted in more and more small farmers going out of business (Barnett, 2000). Butz defined good food as that produced by Midwestern agribusiness companies which could “efficiently, profitably, and cheaply feed the world” by expanding and plowing as much land as possible (Philpott, 2008, p. 1). Ron shared his sentiments on Butz with his wife Barb by adding,

Ron: Butz just totally destroyed the economic rural fabric. Go up and down the road and look. Look and see either they’re living in squalor or they got a job at the university. We’re the only goddamn farm on this end of the county where it’s full
time farming. And I bet you all the full time farmers you could count on one hand in this county. People who are living and working and making it on the farm.

With the agricultural changes of the 1980s and the patented seed technology, agriculture and small family farms forever changed. The consolidations and loss of small family farms soon quickly transitioned to a landscape characterized by corporate dominance. With corporations controlling much of the agricultural research agenda and controlling the means for low-income access to food, corporations remain in control of much of the media’s influence regarding small family farming, the status of food, and subsequent food scares. In trying to understand the contested meanings of good food, the government has tried to redefine good food as being non-local, non-personal, and mass produced to create an abundance of cheap food – all qualities valued in the 1970s and 1980s when memories of food grown in the backyard were still fresh. If companies could grow the food for a fairly cheap price, and families could be freed from on-farm work for off-farm work that brought in a more substantial paycheck, why not? The food system, however, has evolved in the past 40 years as a corporate-controlled game with quarterly earnings as the main prize – not the health of our bodies or the environment. Ron and Barb, on the other hand, are working to educate and (re)define good food as local, personal, good to the soil, good to the environment, good to the people growing the food, and all-around sustainable. Barb and Ron’s definition of good food contributes to their farming practices and roles they maintain as family farmers.

These contested meanings of good food help to paint a picture of the tensions and paradoxes felt by Ron and Barb, who raised concerns about mixed signals from the
government in support of organic small-scale farming and the media reporting and
rhetoric surrounding the stereotype of dangerous and unregulated small farms versus
large-scale regulated (and thus safe) large commercial farms:

Ron: The government sends out these contradictory signals; what they’re doing is
encouraging some kind of modern expansion or some kind of expansion of
infrastructure here, so they’re encouraging us to try to build some infrastructure to
get in place to increase local food production – on the other hand, they are
wanting to limit your ability to sell because they’re so afraid of contamination
from animals and stuff in the fields. So you have the government on one side
saying yes and the other side saying we don’t want you to sell, so in California a
lot of small growers can only sell at farmer’s markets now because they’ve been
pushed out of stores.

Barb: They’ve been pushed out of the stores because of the recent legislation in
California that was a grower-initiated; there are nine big – and I’m talking big
corporate growers - in California, both organic and non-organic, and they supply
95% of all of the produce in the United States. And they are the people who are
driving this movement to have “safe” stuff in stores.

Natalie: Because the big growers are already in the stores, and the more small
farmers who get in the stores, the more it cuts into their profits?

Barb: Exactly. And what you have to understand is that they learned this lesson
big time when the spinach scare happened; they lost 30% of their market share to
local growers in a year, because the local food movement really started to take off
when the food scares started happening. So all of a sudden the big system failed. Well, the big system has been ready to crash and burn for a long time. Why it didn’t happen before - ? Well it probably did but there wasn’t enough communication from one side of the country to the other to know. There weren’t huge outcries before when contamination happened so this is their way to *make it safe* - making your food safe. So instead of being able to go to a farmer’s market and look at the person who grew the food, who’s eating the food that you’re eating that you’re going to be buying from them so consequently you can pretty much guess that it’s okay to eat it, they’re gonna ship it from a week away and you open up the bag and as soon as you open up the bag, if you don’t eat it all right then at that meal, it’s toast! It’s junk! Because who knows how long it’s been in that bag without any oxygen. There’s no oxygen in there. That’s why it doesn’t rot because it’s not air; it’s some other inert gas.

Ron: There’s a branch of government that wants to issue all these proclamations about water quality, washing vegetables, and it comes on with this advocacy about, “We’re trying to make it safe.” Well – it wasn’t the small farmers that caused the problems.

A prevalent theme I repeatedly heard through the interviewing process was farmers defending their livelihood and cleanliness of farming practice. Conventional farmers defended their use of chemicals, organic farmers took me step-by-step through the rigorous water filtration they installed to meet and surpass qualifications, and nearly all farmers were adamant about the healthiness and cleanliness of their food. None of the
farmers I interviewed processed their produce; all growers sold their meat and produce raw. I found myself at an interesting intersection concerning the politics of food: nearly all farmers avoided processing their food (the majority of what is sold in grocery stores), most farmers took pride in growing ‘good’ food that is healthy for our bodies and for the soil, and most farmers were optimistic and convinced that their produce was a solution to a societal problem helped along by politics. The connection to politics and independence became clear to me when I realized most of the farmers I interviewed tried to operate outside of the confines of government and corporate involvement. These farmers set their own prices at the farmer’s market, do not purchase from agribusiness and chemical companies, and try to maintain their food independence exclusive of the government. Most farmers were proud of how much they didn’t purchase from grocery stores. Living independently of chain grocery stores was nearly a badge of honor to the farmers and community members in this Appalachian area.

Nonetheless, while many farmers realized and applauded their own existence outside of agribusiness, or “alternative path” as described by James the farm educator, concern was still voiced for populations without access to non-corporate (a.k.a. good) food. Mary, who farms alternative grains and hopes to market whole-grain healthy cereal bars out of her grains, voiced concern not only for people living in poverty and the government’s role in what foods are provided to the poor, but for the ill health of Americans overall:

Mary: I sent the question to a director of a food bank about how I was going to get people to eat grains they had never heard of, and her answer was, “When people
are hungry, they take what they can get. And they’d be happy to get it.” And she’s apparently seen a lot of diet changes because people have to take what they can get. People’s diet has changed in poverty because what they’re given as poor people is junk to eat. And they’ve been willing to eat junk. There’s a lot of crap out there in our collective consciousness about people on welfare just buy junk food. Okay, well let’s look at that again. How did the junk food get to them? Where is the nearest grocery store? What’s in that grocery store? So, if the food bank, for example, was given a lot of free food from these organic growers, they’d be distributing that food. But they’re getting a lot of processed food from big corporations who write it off and then that food gets distributed and then people are kind of habituated into eating that way.

The concerns posed by Mary and the existential anxieties described by John come from the national dependence on food grown far away (such as California Mexico, and South America), processed with possibly unfair labor practices (migrant workers from Mexico; e.g., meatpacking industry), and transported to your nearest grocery store (in refrigerated trucks and oftentimes ripened by a chemical process en route) (Reding, 2009; Weis, 2007). What has resulted in the expanding global food economy is that 99% of food consumed by Americans is imported; 1% is grown locally (Bosserman, 2009). The definitions on local and global have yet to reach consensus, but a repeated number I have heard, and the radius endorsed by many environmentally-conscious citizens, is 300 miles (Salatin, 2006). Many farmers talked about the 1% of food that is grown locally – and showed great concern for this global dependence.
The local versus national source of food is a rapidly growing debate that helps us understand ways in which people define good food. For many farmers in the Appalachian area, good food is defined in part not by the growing method (organic or conventional), but the proximity and distance of where the food was grown to where the food will be consumed. Whereas many parts of the country hotly debate the definition of good food, the consistent theme among farmers in Appalachia is locality.

With all of the farming policies and food politics, individuals who farm on behalf of and for the public are still at the heart of the matter. Dewey (1927) recognized that individuals who work on behalf of the state are considered public figures; compared to all of the politicians, lobbyists, bureaucrats, and corporate executives of public companies, farmers would be considered public figures who feed all of the aforementioned players. Yet, farmers’ voices are sometimes the last to be considered, least valued, and most taken-for-granted. In explaining his struggle for independence and to assuage his anxiety, John elaborated on why he was questing for “fucking independence”:

John: I probably would, if I sat and thought about this, I could speak this more subversively, more convincingly, in a way that is more convincing to people who are not already part of the choir, but basically what it comes down to is populace. This country dispute goes back to the founding of this nation, which has issues that aren’t talked about in and of itself. But, the “founding fathers,” the founding parents of our nation, didn’t agree with each other. And there were different points of view from the start about how a good nation should be run or structured. It’s Jeffersonian to some extent, but it’s someone who was even more in that
direction than Jefferson, more populated – basically, aside from all the natural
causes of suffering that are just part of being alive and being human, a lot of the
externally created human suffering is created – follow the money, follow the
power. And it’s everything from social, interpersonal suffering, I think; and
oppression in that sense, and also just general community poverty and ill-health
and starvation and everything. Environmental degradation. It seems like all these
problems we need to solve if we’re going to continue in kind of a way that we can
be proud of or we can be happy with ourselves. They seem to all be linked to
separation and to concentration of wealth and power, and separation of people.
Divide and conquer kind of thing; group A has all the wealth and power and they
gave a little to group B and they say to group C – you’re not gonna let them get
away from it; and that’s why we’re all separate. And one way to do that, and a
key way to do that, is a community of people’s food. People’s staff of life. So it
just seems like I hear that 1%, when I hear that 1% it’s like not only does it create
an existential anxiety, although that’s kind of been assuaged by my last few years
of growing food and being able to produce enough calories for myself and maybe
a few others, in a year, but still if my neighbors aren’t being fed, its not going to
be any good for me. It also creates a, “It’s just not right! It’s wrong!” reaction.
That 1% means we are relying on some corporation; basically, we’re relying on
some far-away technocratic organization that is, in my opinion, not founded and
based on such basic ethical principles that I can trust them with my 99% staff of
life. And my communities. And I feel like feeding each other makes families. It’s
a ritual to put food in someone else’s mouth. By feeding the people of our region and community directly from the land that we’re working, we’re creating bonds. We can create bonds that are both interpersonal, between people and the earth that we’re living on, maybe the other creatures and plants and animals that we’re sharing this earth with, and we might start to see some great healing. So that 1% represents all the room for improvement toward that for me. I think there’s a lot of ways to do that, but this happens to be the way that seems like the most bang for your buck. That’s why I say it’s about fucking freedom and democracy.

The politics of food and the contested meanings of good food take the shape of many tensions, concerns, paradoxes, and conflicts experienced by the farming families of Appalachia in regards to their attempts at escaping or working within the parameters of the government and corporate agriculture involvement. While some families understood and accepted the role government agencies and corporations play in the realities of small farming families today, nearly all families recognized and acknowledged future trouble on the horizon for access to good food – trouble that almost certainly has the fingerprints of Earl Butz and his collaborative attempts at democratizing farming. Undeniably, good food is defined by these farming families in drastically different ways than by the government. The ways in which farming families make sense of the history of farming and corporate involvement creates a new understanding of how individual organizations (such as family farms) operate within the framework of larger democratic organizations in the quest to produce good food.
Dewey’s (1927) observations of conflicting interests when the public, private, community, and state all interface is exactly described in the plight of farmers who produce local food in Appalachia. Discourses addressing independence and control illustrate the dialectics Dewey (1927) foreshadowed. The government and corporations govern and control agricultural practices, which can be viewed as infringements on independence by farmers. For the farmers in the Appalachian region trying to produce and sell ‘good’ food, the government impedes their success. As this theme illustrates, food is a commodity, but good food is subjective and understood differently by different populations. While farmers only represent 1.5% of the nation’s population (U.S. EPA, 2007), the fact that everyone must eat keeps the farming population at the forefront of government attention. While the public wants to believe the government protects the interests of the citizens, farmers in Appalachia are skeptical of big-business agriculture and government involvement. As the farm crash of the 1970s and 1980s proved (Berry, 1977), the government has operated with specific interests in mind, and not necessarily those of the small-scale local farmers. While these farming families live with tensions, conflicts, and paradoxes in negotiating growing practices and government regulations, the contested meanings of good food and the politics of food is a local and national matter that only continues to grow in importance.

“The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth”: Politics of Scale and Appalachian Family Farming

The current state of farming for Appalachian family farmers follows a historical trajectory, primarily influenced by the economy and the government. Considering the first theme and the tensions between farmers (small-scale organizations) and corporations...
and the government (large-scale organizations), the second theme explores the politics of scale including the history, realities, struggles, and future in and of family farming.

It is rare for a small family farm to survive multiple generations and successions and still be operating with a profit today (Weis, 2007). The nation lost many farms in the crash of the 1980s, and the current trend is for small family farms to either sell out to bigger farm consolidators or continue farming at a modest income. The profit margins for mid-size family farms today are too slim to support multiple generations and families, so many farmers are choosing to sell out, thus resulting in the oldest average age of farmers, 56, this nation has ever seen (USDA, 2002). From my own experience, my father has long since let his children know that he will be the last farmer in our family. For many reasons, my father did not want any of his children to take over his farming: profit margins are not great enough to support multiple families, and in the case of multiple children (a.k.a. multiple inheritors), the buy-out of farm land to maintain equal inheritance is simply too expensive for the next generation to start farming.

The title of this theme, “The meek shall inherit the earth,” is a Beatitudte taken from the Bible which claims that those who give up worldly goods will be later rewarded. Mary, one of the farmers I talked to, brought up this verse to explain her view on farmers and farming. To Mary, what was formerly considered a humble, modest practice is now quite politicized and heated:

Mary: It kind of reminds me of “The meek shall inherit the earth.” Here are these modest farmers all over the world who do their modest work, which is to grow corn and grow various grains and various beans. I think of the farmers in
Guatemala growing their beans and how they are not doing anything different from what they’ve always done; and yet, what they’re doing right now is extremely political. Whether they feel it is political or not, and we just happen to be aware of the politic of it. It doesn’t mean that we are the only ones who are being political. Anybody growing heirloom or growing a plot for their village, up against the big corporations that want to come in and say, “Here’s the right seed, and we own it,” are doing something very political, and yet they can retain their modesty and humility as farmers. And I’m kind of fascinated by that. It’s kind of a paradoxical, complex painting.

Farming in Appalachia today is rapidly changing, just like most industries in the 21st century. Prices are fluctuating, profit margins narrowing, acquiring health insurance is of paramount importance, and the continuation of farming for future generations is not always feasible. However, our access to food is growing more and more dependent on a small window of growers in a centralized location in California. What will become of the farmers in Appalachia? What are the farmers in Appalachia doing to secure food for themselves, their families, and their neighbors? How do the farmers in Appalachia grow their food, and why? These are some of the motivating questions of this dissertation, and common threads I heard resonate throughout the interview process were money, soil, legacy, and scale. In all of these interviews, the politics of scale was discussed when answering the above questions. As I learned more about the politics of food, I realized that simply demonizing all large corporations was not enough to explain the farming situation in Appalachia as well as other parts of the country. The farmers in Appalachia
all operate on a small scale, thus more localized, and the issues and politics of scale from their perspective emerged as ‘smaller is better.’ While all of the farmers who participated in this study were in fact small-scale (operating on less than 100 acres), the capabilities and products of small-scale farming seemed to be privileged over large-scale. Image 2 depicts a terraced garden on a hillside, representative of the small plots and hilly topography common in Appalachia. The terraced landscape is one way farmers utilize uneven plots of land. Farming on a small scale in a hilly terrain requires multiple large gardens, much like the terraced garden in Image 2. I argue that the politics of scale play a central role in the contested meanings of good food. Through interviewing farmers about the organizational operations of their family farms in Appalachia, I began to make sense of the politics, issues, and economies of scale concerning the highly contested meaning of good food.
Farmers play the important role of supplying food for the nation. Traditionally, farmers are independent operators and do not fall under typical organizational communication structures. As the self-employed manager of a non-traditional organization, farmers’ work is not contained to one location. In the field, at the kitchen table, at the bank, and in the shed, farmers simultaneously handle human resources, accounting, quality control, and management. Being self-employed and serving as your own boss creates a unique organizational communication research context because, as depicted earlier, even modest forms of farming are now political. The ways in which
farmers choose to farm has perhaps never been as important. Examining the reasons farmers choose to farm the way they do gives glimpses into the cultural values that farmers draw upon when making their farming operation decisions. The Appalachian farmers who participated in my study began to weave a picture involving the politics of scale, definitions of good food, and the cultural values of the farmers.

I spent one morning talking to James, a farm educator, about his experiences working with the farmers in the Appalachian region. I asked him why he thought the farmers he routinely works with make the decisions they do regarding their farming practices. While I interviewed participating families separately, I sought out James because I knew he had experience working with many different farmers in a multi-county radius and frequently dealt with issues of scale.

James: A lot of it goes back to some of their [farmers’] basic beliefs on what is best for the environment and what is best for society in the long run. They [farmers] usually have some type of system of values that is underlined and that their decisions are based on. And some of it again is from study that they’ve done, convictions that they’ve come to, so they decide that that’s what they have to do. They also have a concern about long-term sustainability. And looking at the chemicals as being something we cannot sustain, we’re getting production from it now, but how long and how real is that production? So some farmers around here have some real concerns that way. From other farmers that do use chemicals, I’ve also heard the argument from them that, for example, our biggest crop farmer in the county told me, “The only thing I’ve ever wanted to do my whole life has
been to farm. And the only way I can make that dream happen for the way I wanted to farm was to go into this type of agriculture which involves me doing this.” And he’ll say, “To some extent, yes, I’m owned by the seed companies, but it’s allowed me to do my dream that I’ve had ever since growing up, this is all I’ve ever wanted to do.” So you have kind of both issues coming there; both of them have values that help them to make those decisions, it’s just I think a matter of how they approach it and long-term outlooks some of them are taking.

James frequently interacts with farmers wanting to try new farming methods or who contact him because of questions or problems the farmers are facing. James recognized the close proximity to a large university as part of the explanation for why farming in this area is so unique. James sees many new people enter farming from other occupations and with various educational backgrounds, and he credits education as part of the reason he sees new farmers seek alternative growing methods. I wanted to know about some of the challenges James sees farmers face on a regular basis, and this is when James introduced me to the issues of scale:

James: The big challenges our farmers face here, being small-scale, is sustainability. How are they going to create a viable operation that allows them to either be independent from off-farm income, and/or, can they bring the next generation into the farming operation? What’s going to allow that next generation to come in? And so with that small farm, you have the overriding issue of sustainability, and a lot of that, of course, goes to the economics. Because you’re probably going to have someone interested in keeping on, so that goes back to the
scale. It’s really hard when you have small-scale agriculture to have enough income to drive that operation because a lot of agriculture is set up on the model of small-profit margins, so you’ve got to have large volumes. If you’re only making a couple pennies on a bushel, you’ve got to have a lot of bushels to make enough dollars. And so our small farmers here have traditionally tried to get around that or work within that system by adding value to their products. Instead of raising 500 hogs, can I raise 50 or 75 and make that income look closer to that big operation? Because instead of selling into conventional market and getting pennies per pound, instead of getting 40 cents per pound, I can sell my meat for $3 per pound or $4 per pound. So they’ve got to do something to add value to their produce or create some other type of niche that allows them to jack up that price. But then, as we get cost of living and everything moving up and healthcare becomes a big issue, they have to keep finding ways to compete. Even the small farm traditionally struggles with ways of scaling up somewhat as well.

James articulated a complex web of decisions, tensions, paradoxes, contradictions, stressors, and problems that farmers face and manage on a regular basis. One primary tension for farmers hoping to grow organically is the span of time necessary to certify animals as organic, such as the sheep depicted in Image 3. These sheep were purchased from a non-organic farm but are being raised organically. The offspring of these sheep will be certifiable as organic, as organic certification requires three generations of organic verification. The family sells the meat at the farmer’s market and
recieves $7.00 - $10.00 per pound for lamb and $3.50 to $6.00 for pork by selling directly to the customer instead of selling to a distributor.

While many of these tensions and issues are not necessarily new to farming, the decisions made currently dictate the future of the farm. The politic issues are embedded in the practical and logistical decisions farmers make. Farm organically or conventionally? Organic requires additional government certification. Conventional means buying genetically modified seed and synthetic inputs from big agricultural corporations. These decisions have very practical but political ramifications, and I found more often than not that the farmers’ cultural values and education played a direct role in making decisions about their farming operation. As James also mentioned, the topography and a lack of access to flat land eliminates large-scale farming as an option for Appalachian farmers. However, farming on a small scale still dictates future decisions on farming methods.
Another market of scale emerging from participants’ dialogue was that of global, regional, and local scale. A unique aspect to farming in Appalachia is the debate of defined boundaries of what is regional and local. For Salatin (2007), selling beyond a 300-mile radius is unacceptable and considered unsustainable. However, for the local farmer’s market, a heated debate takes place regularly regarding the definitions of local, regional, and global. Local food for the farmer’s market is food produced in the current state and any contiguous states. As one could imagine, this distance has the potential to become quite substantial. Yet, as Mary explained, demarcating these boundaries is very
important when farming for sustainability because sustainability has and needs boundaries:

Mary: It seems though that the question is: What constitutes a sustainable region? Because regional could mean the Appalachian region or the Ohio Appalachian region; or Southeast Ohio Region; or a county, but, the question connected to staple seeds and grains and beans is that what’s the right scale? Both for growing it and for processing it? What’s the geography for that right scale? So you have to figure out the right scale and then figure out the geography. How many acres of farmable land is there? How many farmers are there that will grow these crops? How many consumers are there? And I think that local is really the buzz word and is defined differently in each region. It just depends.

As there currently is no socially agreed-upon definition for locally sourced food, this again raises the issue of scale. Throughout talking with several different farming families, I began to realize that small-scale, local, and sustainable were emerging as central components to the Appalachian farmers’ definitions of good food. Brad, a non-chemical using, non-certified organic farmer who sells at and serves on the board of the local farmer’s market, is also concerned with making boundaries for ‘local food’ too broad.

Brad: These are real important issues that we’re trying to deal with. It’s kind of a slippery slope. I think our definition of local is not local enough; our definition of local is Ohio and contiguous states. I think we could do a 200 mile radius. I think people want to support local because there’s an instinctive feeling that we need to get local producers. People are coming to the markets because they want that kind
of stuff. I feel like if we don’t set these rules up right, and we kinda let it go for a while, and it brings in customers because there’s more choice, but how can we make it more like ‘walk the talk.’

In reading my transcripts from interviews with farmers, it would appear as though farmers might spend more time dealing with political and community issues than they do farming. The work of a farmer in Appalachia, I soon learned, is never finished. There is no ‘clocking out’ at 5 o’clock and forgetting about the day’s work. I have observed farmers carrying their worries with them to meetings, social gatherings, and to and from the farmer’s market. For the farmers in the Appalachian area who call attention to the local food system and want to sell their products locally, I heard consensus that the local food movement will gain speed but not without an impetus in the magnitude and form of a national economic collapse. As James the farm educator explained,

James: It is going to be really tough right in those areas until we come to that point where we see we really need to make a big change. It’s gonna be hard to go against the grain. If any alternative methods work, it’s gonna have to start in areas like this, where topography and other resources limit that [national large-scale] model and we say, “That model doesn’t fit us.” So we have to do this, and then it will be a little more acceptable. But it’s gonna be pretty tough in Illinois, Indiana, western Ohio, to say, ‘We can’t do this,’ because right now that’s a system working and propped up by synthetic input - - and it is working to some degree. But then when you look at our world population, are we painting ourselves into a corner? If you look at what happened in Cuba, when we slapped an oil embargo
on them and they were farming with the big tractors and had the big expansive land holdings, and they were into large-scale production agriculture; the embargo got slapped on them, their farming operations totally changed, and in two years they were back up at the same level. They created small farms. But you can do some things in a dictatorship that you can’t do in a democracy. They could come in and say, “You have 5,000 acres, ok you have 10 acres now and the rest of your land is getting divided up among the city.” They mobilized this whole system and turned their country around in two years: “We can’t get fertilizer? Okay. We’re organic.” Or, “We’re gonna grow compost. And do green manure products.” So, it can be done!

James explained to me how as much as certain populations want a change in the production, processing, and distribution of food, the process is slow and will need great motivation. His example of Cuba, while drastically different than the democratic system in the United States, was used to illustrate that change can be made, but perhaps only from crisis. If a finite amount of oil exists, and any major changes occurred to our oil supply thus drastically changing the way our nation’s economy operates, James’ example of Cuba is positive encouragement that big changes could be made to our current farming system – from large-scale to small-scale. James also works with local high schools and knows firsthand what farming and production methods are taught in vocational agriculture classes. He recognizes the difficulty of farm work and the obstacles ahead to shape future generations into small-scale farming to support local food systems.
James: Change is going to be hard in our country. And farming is hard work. If you look at the way these small farmers in this county work as compared to big scale conventional farmers, look at the intense labor they put in as opposed to getting on a tractor and plowing. I mean, it’s a different type of work. And how many people want to go out and work that hard? It’s going to require that we have to have people moving back onto the land; but how do we do that? How do you redistribute this land? How do you get people back into that same work ethic? If it was that easy, you’d probably have people lined up to bid for ending-generation farms, but you don’t see that. It can be done, but whether it will be done is going to be society’s challenge. And what kind of policies are we going to have to have to make that happen? We can do it.

Part of what controls the past, current, and future states of farming is the agriculture education programs in high schools. As one arena for non-farm kids to be exposed to farming as an industry, lifestyle, and occupation, high school programs serve as a source of socialization into farming. However, the farming methods taught are of big-scale, conventional agriculture. James spends time with area schools and had made several observations about the programs sensitizing high school students to farming:

James: The question I have I guess of some of those programs is that tendency to teach current agriculture methods. So these kids go through these classes and they’re like, “Oh yeah! The big tractors! The big farms! The big row crops!” …And then when they get out into the real world, they’re like, “Well this aint gonna work!? How am I gonna finance…” and then that dream dies. So we’ve got
to start teaching alternative methods in those kinds of settings. And that’s hard because there’s all this glitz and the glitter of the big-scale agriculture looks really cool and you’re out there running the big combine or driving the tractor, and there is an attraction to it. It’s kind of neat, you get that iron fever and you’d like to have all that. But that’s not what’s making the money. All that stuff rusts.

The work of a farmer, small or large scale, is physical and demanding. Long considered blue collar work, farmers work long hours in all types of weather at the season’s demand. In numerous conversations with farmers, many participants joked about the multi-tasking nature of a farmer. Environmentalist, conservationist, mechanic, meteorologist, veterinarian, economist, and businessmen are just some of the multiple roles farmers play. Whether farming three acres vegetables or 3,000 acres of grains, the work of farmers’ is sometimes considered a labor of love. My father often reminisces about how he can remember being a young boy and getting excited at the sound of a diesel engine staring. My father jokes that, ‘he’s just a dumb farmer,’ yet he says farming runs in his blood and he’s lucky to get to do the kind of work he loves doing. Much of what James shared with me was concern for how will future generations be convinced to keep growing? Someone needs to grow our food. But on what scale? Large-scale farming uses more resources than small-scale. Large-scale farming is producing a great quantity of food at the global level right now, but the interest in local small-scale is growing in consumer demand – and with good reason.
The struggles large-scale farmers face differs drastically than that of small-scale farmers. The food outputs of different farming scales have their pros and cons, but the participants of this study were adamant about the cons of large-scale farming and the pros of small-scale. Many land plots the farmers work are too small for new, large farm equipment and implements, so many farmers rely on machinery that may be 30, 40, or 50 years old. The equipment is smaller and more appropriate for small-acreage plots. The politic of scale continues to surround contested meanings of ‘good’ food.

However, regardless of the farming scale or type, weather plays an important (and largely uncontrollable) role. While some farmers recognize the controllable struggles and
tensions within their line of work, other farmers recognize their inability to control what Mother Nature decides. Dwight, a non-certified organic farmer explained his perspective on control in farming:

Dwight: Modern society in general has the attitude that we can control everything. And we’re the masters. And in this scale of farming, I know I’m not the master. I have very little control what goes on out there. I’ve set up a diverse enough system that I can weather through problems, lose some here, and win some there. So, you know, farmers who just depend on one or two crops, they’re asking for it! [laughs] Or, if you try so tightly to control something, you know, if the insects get out of control, ok, well I’m gonna lose that crop. There it goes. Move on to something else. I’m not gonna go overboard trying, poisoning our land, poisoning our earth trying to stop something that probably won’t work anyway.

In my experiences growing up on a farm and throughout conducting this research, I have learned that farmers are, if anything, strong in their convictions about what is best for the earth, the body, and the public. While no two farmers are going to have identical opinions about what is best in any realm, I began this research project very interested in learning where those beliefs came from. The contributing cultural values and decision-making information regarding farming production modes were mixed and varied. In asking farmers why they farmed the way they farmed, some were articulate and ready with an answer while others had to think and reflect for a while. Some farmers operated the way their father and previous generations farmed; some, for purely financial gains. Other farmers had firm beliefs about the environment which dictated their mode of
farming. Lester, a vegetable farmer, explained the succession of his farm and his rationale for his conventional farming methods:

Lester: My dad, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, and my great-great-grandfather worked here. Farmed here. In this area. So, we’ve been farming right here in these same fields for over 100 years. Mostly everything we do, we do it because that’s the way we’re gonna make the most money because that’s what we do to make a living. We feel we will get a better profit from doing it a certain way. It’s different when you have a little garden and it is just a hobby, as to when you’re depending on it to live until next year. There’s nothing wrong with organic vegetable farming, if you can make a living at it. They have to be able to cover their costs. And they probably say the same thing about me. I have to be able to cover my costs. Well, I can to a certain extent through volume, where they try to do very small volume with a very high price, more or less. And that’s why we’re all at the market trying to sell retail, trying to get the best price. But if they can do it, fine. But I don’t see it for us working out, just because of the way we’ve been doing things seems to work for us, and I’m sure what they’re doing works for them. They’ve often asked me about becoming organic, and I say, “Well, I just don’t see how it would work for me and the way I do things in my current situation.” Maybe some day, it would. But I don’t think their higher prices make up for their lower yields. I think I make as much money per acre as they do. But, maybe they think they’re doing better than I am, I don’t know. But for us, I don’t
think it would work out for us. It does work for them, I know. But they just do it differently. It’s just what we’re used to and what we’ve been doing.

Lester, who had been raised and socialized into a farming family, recognizes his financial motives in deciding on how to farm. He also notes that his current farming methods have changed only slightly over the past 50 years. Image 5 depicts a flatbed wagon on Lester’s farm loaded with seedlings to be planted in the earth. Germinating the plants from seeds and using this wagon to transplant to the fields has been his family’s method for decades.

*Image 5.* Flatbed wagon of seedlings ready to be transplanted to garden.
Participants in this study exemplified the unlimited types of socialization that create members of organizations and societies (Giddens, 1979). Farmers who were not born into farming families experienced farming differently perspectives and socialization routes. Dwight shared his story about his background and how his education shaped his farming operation:

Dwight: We bought the farm in 1974. And we’ve been here ever since. We were both grad students at the local university, in botany, so we had an interest in outdoors, environmental issues. We liked the area, so we wanted to stay here. Land was cheap. I did get my degree in botany and did look for a professional job for a while, never came up with anything. Margaret got a teaching job here, so we stayed! And just dove right into farming. Without any preparation, without any idea of what we were getting into and I still don’t know it all! I did read books, like the Rodale books and things like that, but mainly it was just the experience. Trial and error.

Dwight’s education and environmental background played a foundational role in shaping his farming operation. Another organic farming family, Mark and Carol, articulated their reasons behind farming organically. Interestingly, money was never once brought up by Mark or Carol; instead, their focus and intensity for farming was centered on the soil and future generations.

Carol: I know for me, what’s important too, is to have land and farmers, the new generation available so we can eat. We take advantage of the supermarkets and the processed foods and things like that, but all in all, if we didn’t have farmers,
we wouldn’t be able to eat, period. And what I like about organic is it doesn’t hurt
the top soil, so that’s what I was kind of getting into, where the new generation
can come in and have really good, fertile soil to grow vegetables and not have to
mend the land and mend the soil, and then be able to grow very healthy plants.
Also, we’re in a period of industrialized agriculture, with all the pesticides, and
we’re noticing lots of change in the environment.
Mark: Earth worms. Earthworms are not showing up in a lot of fields, because
different fertilizers and pesticides are being applied, and the soil is a living
environment that you need to replenish the same way we replenish our own body.
Carol: So we’re noticing the lack of earthworms, and the bees, and different
animals that are not here anymore, or not as plentiful. We’re also getting to realize
that our waterways are polluted because of the runoff from the pesticides, and the
erosion of the soil and how it leaks into the water beds. So, organic is really not
an option for us, I don’t think. It has to be like this because if not, it’s gonna hurt
us in the long run. Even in the short run. Mark’s whole notion with organic sprays
out there is, even if you do organic sprays and different minerals that are very safe
for the environment, once you start using those you’re gonna have to use it more
and more. And then the plant becomes immune to what you’re using, so you’re
gonna have to find something different. So his strategy is to not even spray
anything, not even organic matter. And there’s of course different techniques in
organic farming, for example, like crop rotation.
Mark: And it’s also a good practice to do that for what nutrients and different types of plants need, because it’s not just one kind of seed over a great area.

Carol: So what’s important to us is to leave the next generations good, fertile soil, and non-damage so they’ll be able to grow food for everybody else, too.

The succession to future generations that Carol discussed resonated with many farmers who were rightly concerned about the future of their farm. As stated by Pitts et al., (2009), many farming families do not take steps to formally plan their farm’s succession. Further, only half of farm operators studied in California had named a successor (Girard & Baker, 2005). The succession of a farm is vital to the farm’s continuity. The next generation, whether to pass on fertile soil or so somebody continues to work the land, was brought up by every farmer during our interviews. James, the farm educator, explained how farmers come to him and talk about the plans for their farms:

   James: This farmer that I was talking to, he’s already mid-to-late 30s and this whole thing he’s focused on is, “What’s going to be here for my kids?” The farmer is already looking to the future because he’s the 8th generation on the farm, and so he’s thinking about, “So now what am I doing so when my kids come in?” Because when he took over the farm, it was really run-down, in very bad shape, so he’s trying to build it up and leave something, so if they come in, it is going to be sustainable; they’re not going to have to dump a boat load of money into it, so his whole focus is on building this thing up and getting it going. So he’s trying to work on low-input and work on the grazing, utilize natural resources that are
Many farmers mentioned wanting to pass on a sustainable form of small-scale farming requiring as few of inputs as possible. Other farmers were simply uncertain about what the future held for their farm. James told me another story about a farmer who was uncertain about his orchard business’s future:

James: We were over at Teal Orchards not that long ago. He’s got this great operation and he’s on land that his grandfather, maybe great-grandfather had settled and he showed us where some of the original cabin sites were, and he’s got all these trees out there and he knows about them all. He’ll talk about, “Oh I remember this tree; it’s first year, this branch grew…” I mean it’s like every tree has its personal history and he has like a 1,000 or couple thousand trees! He could tell you about each tree and what happened, like, “I remember when we planted this tree and what was happening…” And he’s got this really incredible connection to all these trees and the land, and he’s planting this orchard he’s calling his retirement orchard which is 200 trees! That’s gonna be a huge amount of labor! But the thing was, we asked him, “What’s going on with your family and what’s going to happen when you retire…” and he didn’t know. He has daughters that do come and help him and work at the stand, but he’s not sure they’re going to come back and want to do this. So, boy, that really makes you wonder.
Another farmer, Brad, operates a three-generation farm where his parents own part of the land, he and his wife operate the farm, and their children are becoming involved. Brad is unclear in his plans for the future, but has chosen farming methods that incorporate his entire family. Brad and his wife Meg shared with me their thought process behind their farming operation decisions:

Meg: Part of what we’re doing incorporates our kids. And we’ve made a lot of choices about how to make things good for them, too. We could probably be doing more, making more money, whatever, if we made other choices. But we don’t want to sacrifice our family for that.

Brad: We spend time with our kids. We try to incorporate them. If we have to do work, they have to come with us sometimes, but we try to reward ourselves with a vacation, if we can.

Meg: We don’t really want to be slaves to work just for money.

Brad: It’s not all about the money. But the challenge is fun.

Meg: And we do want the money, and we always hope to make more of it.

Brad: Now that we’re doing okay, it’s a lot less stressful. A couple of years ago we were really struggling. And now we’ve got enough stuff going on that we’re not in critical poverty. It’s not like we’re getting rich yet, but that’s the fun part! The goal setting, the business planning. Yeah I think family is something – yeah, we could have a bigger business.
Meg: If all we did was work, which a lot of people do. And Brad does more than I do; I’m the one who can turn things off more easily than him. 4 o’clock is when I’m done. Kids are getting off the bus. He stays more in the big picture than I do.

Brad: But it really helps us out because Meg can come down to the farm, and it’s convenient, it’s not like you have to drive far, it doesn’t break up your whole day. And we work from home doing stuff.

Meg: Yeah, we work probably every day in some capacity. But we want our kids to have fun along the way. To not resent that our business takes time away.

The motives behind farming practices differ for every farmer, but certain themes and convictions about what farmers believe to be best for them, their family, the environment, and society resonated throughout the interviews with participants. After looking at why farmers have shaped their business the way they chose, the tangible product of food remains the objective of farming.

The politics within family farming and the politics of food connect to the food which is coming from the farms. The percentage of people producing the nation’s food is only declining, and the population of illegal migrant workers in agriculture is increasing (Reding, 2009). The family farm represents a sector of individuals who are at risk for extinction yet serve a vital role in the larger economic picture of the nation. James was ultimately positive about the future of farming, but he too brought up the concern of finite versus infinite natural resources as well as the career viability in farming for future generations.
James: And really, we have to get back to where’s our source of energy? Is it coming from the sun? And what do we grow from that? What can harvest that and make use of those plants? I mean, we’ve got to get back to some of those basic concepts. It’s got to start being taught even in those vo-ag [vocational agriculture] places. I’m sure there’s some of that being done, but they’re also promoting some of those big conventional agriculture ties. So if we want kids to say, ‘I want to be farmer when I grow up,’ there has to be some profitability in it. They have to be able to say, ‘I can go out there and I can work and I can make a living.’ And only then is there a potential to pass this on. They have to be able to see that and know, ‘I can have health insurance.’ So there are some real obstacles obviously before that is going to happen. But, you know, we might come around to that also again if we bump up against this barrier where we can’t keep using all these chemical inputs, hopefully things will start to change. But it’s gonna be a process. It is not gonna happen that quick.

The current situation of farming in the United States is complex yet critical. Juggling the source and production modes of food with the tensions and paradoxes of working within a democratic structure contributes to very defined ideas of what is best. Small-scale farming has advantages and disadvantages over large-scale farming. The ways in which people define good food, however, seems to be directly related to the issues of scale. Defining local has become a very interesting concept for many people; I expect to see many more public discussions arguing the parameters of local, regional, and
global. For these farmers in the Appalachian region, local and sustainable are directly linked to their interpretation of good food.

“I’m not a farmer yet. Just learning.”: Negotiating Agricultural Identity

Among the organizational facets of operating a family farm, this study examines the identity of small-scale Appalachian family farmers. Society has long been fascinated by the mythic stereotype of cowboys and farmers, and their identity has, for quite some time in the United States, been an urban legend (Rushing, 1983). In part due to the portrayal of yeoman farmers and gun-slinging cowboys on the silver screen (e.g., *High Noon; Shane*) and in television (e.g., *Little House on the Prairie; Gunsmoke*), westerners and farmers who work the land are viewed differently than men of other occupations (such as accountants, lawyers, and physicians). From an organizational identification perspective, the label of ‘farmer’ is interesting because the general public interprets the label of farmer to be laden with values that the farmer might not personally express (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Rushing, 1983). The title of farmer has “baggage” that leads the public in a direction beyond merely growing food (Cheney, 1983a). Honest, hard-working, humble, modest, responsible, independent, trustworthy, and patriotic, farmers are often viewed in the mythic light of the rugged, tough, individualistic renaissance man but also contrasted with the perception of being selfless, protective, and community-oriented, often depicted in films and books as playing the stoic character who never needs rescuing and who rides off into the country side, continuing their efforts and work to feed their families, neighbors, and country (Rushing, 1983). Perhaps the Jeffersonian philosophy, which places farmers as the backbone of a nation, still rings true. Regardless,
the identity of farmers continues to be fraught with competing tensions and colliding values (e.g., individualism versus collectivism) that influence decisions farmers make in their agricultural practices today.

The socialization of organizational members has been closely studied by organizational communication scholars (Jablin, 1987; Weick, 1995). The socialization into family farming by family members was a key component to many people entering farming as an occupation. While some participants were first generation farmers, most were born into a farming family and socialized through their family into the farming industry. Interestingly, the socialization stories and self-perceptions of socialization shared by the participants in this study follows Giddens’ (1979) approach to socialization. As Giddens stated, socialization is not a passive imprint on a person but instead an active process. Many of the second and third generation farmers reported joining their parents in farm work as a child. Furthermore, socialization does not simply stop at a certain part in a career or life span, but instead is part of a whole life-cycle (Giddens 1979). Some participants have been engaging in farm work, but do not feel ‘ready’ to give themselves the title of farmer, such as the following story of Rachel. Finally, no one type of socialization exists in which individuals are socialized into a society, culture, or organization (Giddens, 1979). Some farmers in this study were socialized by their parents, other by the media. The socialization of farmers directly contributed to how they self-reported their identity.

The structure of socialization (Giddens 1979) lent a frame to examine the identity and formation of farmers, which is a loaded and complicated title (Cheney, 1983a).
Interviewing farmers about their self-perceptions as a member of a farming family and watching their identity unfold before their eyes was at times entertaining and other times awesome. I conducted a preliminary interview with farmers eight months before conducting formal interviews for this dissertation. I had the opportunity to interview one farmer Brad, in both time periods; once in April and again in December of the same year. Brad’s responses to his self-perception as a farmer appeared to be ever-evolving:

Brad (April 2009): I never thought I was gonna be a dairy farmer, a fruit person. But I was basically trying to look for a way to make a living here because I like this community, and making a living in a way I could feel good about. Kinda like the whole idea of a right livelihood. My major in college was about holistic transitions to sustainability, so I really am doing what I set out to do. But how it has come to pass, I didn’t know how that was gonna happen.

Much of Brad’s identity comes from being active in the sustainability movement, and that identity drives much of his decision-making. During the next interview with Brad, I had the opportunity to talk with him about his perception as a farmer:

Brad (December 2009; Beginning of 2 hour interview): I never thought I’d be a farmer, for one thing.

Natalie: No? Why not?

Brad: I just never thought I’d see myself as a farmer, although we’re more than farmers now. What we do, and it’s kind of interesting to try to define, but it all goes back to sustainability. I’m really into sustainability. That’s kind of one of my passions, my mission statement for a personal business.
Natalie: So not necessarily just farming, but farming sustainably?

Brad: Yeah. And making money. And making it sustainable and economically viable. And I really love that we’re different, that we do lots of different things. And I feel like these are sustainable solutions to problems. Good farming is a science, as far as soils and nutrition and your animal health and all that stuff.

Natalie: “Good” farming?

Brad: Well, yeah, if you’re serious about it. And the same thing like with the food production stuff, it’s obviously very scientifically based, it’s food science. I think you gotta be smart. It’s worked out for us because we’ve taken some risks and developed some of these ideas.

Natalie (same interview, towards the end): So you are a farmer now, huh?

Brad: I am. But I’m a real lazy farmer. I really try to work smart. The farming part, I don’t look at it, if I’m doing it right, it’s more like a mental game to me. Planning things out properly so you’re not working harder than you should. Because a lot of it is just managing resources. Such as time. Last year I didn’t milk as much. I only milked when the season got started and everyone else was on-line and I was only milking about three times a week and the only reason I was doing that was because I didn’t want to let the whole thing go to people who didn’t know what to look for. But this year I can back off even more from certain things and focus on other things, like how we add value to our milk. There are things we can do, and that is totally not farming. That is food production. So I’m a farmer but I feel like we’re more sophisticated than your typical idea of a farmer,
but that doesn’t really give farmers much credit. Like a guy growing crops, they really know what they’re doing. You gotta know timing and stuff. But I learned to build fence really well. And that’s an important thing for cows. That’s farm work.

Meg (Brad’s wife): And learning how to take care of animals in general.

Brad: Now that we’ve learned a lot we got a lot of kinks out of our system. It’s building systems is how I look at things. The whole business. After you get it established and you get it set up, then it should kinda run on its own if you’re doing it right.

Brad (at the end of the interview): Well, I’m more than a farmer. In reality, I’m more of a business owner. An agricultural business owner. But it involves a lot of things.

I found it fascinating to watch Brad understand and articulate his identity, especially in light of how his operation (and subsequently his identity) changed and evolved over eight months. The organizational communication literature has discussed at length the intersection of organizational commitment and organizational identity (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Christensen & Cheney, 1994). The relationship between organizational identity and organizational commitment are distinct but interdependent; identifying highly with an organization does not necessarily pledge eternal commitment to that organization, but the chances are certainly greater (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). The process of identifying with farm work is, in Carl’s case, more difficult than for Lester, who was born and raised on a farm. Carl expresses commitment to the sustainability movement before he commits to being a farmer, and he struggles with
identifying as a traditional farmer, yet through farming he carries out his sustainable
efforts.

Rachel, a 30-year old who recently began working full-time on her family’s farm,
specifically did not consider herself a farmer. Rachel has been working on the farm for
one year and clearly recognizes her limited experience and knowledge:

Natalie: So, Rachel, I’m interested – are you now a farmer?
Dwight (Rachel’s father): Yeah. Do you consider yourself a farmer yet?
Rachel: No. Not yet. Just learning. I just thought, if I’m gonna work, I don’t have
a college degree, I can’t stand being indoors, I wouldn’t like an office job, and I
thought if I’m gonna work, and obviously I have to work for a living, if I’m gonna
work, what do I want to do? But this? I think that this is what I want to do. So
that’s where I am right now, I just think that this is what I want to do. Whether I
have what it takes, I don’t know. My dad is not your normal, average person –
he’s a very hard worker. I don’t think anybody works as hard as Dad does. I don’t
know if I can do it. But I can try. I also want to home school my children and I
want to have more kids, so, can I do it all? I don’t know. [laughs] I don’t know.

Perhaps Rachel’s lack of identification as a farmer, although she has been
supported solely from farm income for the past year, is derived from her perception that
farming is a life-long enterprise, not just a job. I am curious about how long Rachel will
need to engage in farming work before she considers herself a farmer. The commitment
and identification certainly go hand-in-hand for Rachel, who is still negotiating her place
on the farm and her future.
Rachel also mentions many aspects of identifying as a farmer in her explanation, one being education. Formal education was discussed in numerous interviews I conducted, but always as a side-note. Rachel holds no college degree, yet sees farming as a viable career. Rachel’s father Dwight has a master’s degree in ecology, yet he too disregards education as playing a role in his occupation:

Margaret (Dwight’s wife): Tell her what your mother always said. “When you gonna get a real job?”

Dwight: Yeah. That’s what she said. “When am I gonna get a real job?”

Natalie: Because farming wasn’t real?

Margaret: No.

Dwight: They didn’t think so. They knew it was hard work and not much money, and they didn’t really consider it a lifetime career that should be pursued by one of their children.

Margaret: With a master’s degree.

Dwight: With a master’s degree. [laughs] Yeah. I didn’t really use my education.

The stereotype of the uneducated farmer shrouds the stereotype of a farmer, yet of the nine families I talked to for this research, six of the nine families brought up how their college education influenced their decision to be a farmer but did not necessarily play a central role in their daily farm operations. Either their education brought them to the area and they began farming, or their education confirmed that they wanted to do work in agriculture, sustainability, or community.
While some of the farmers viewed their work as not requiring formal education, most of the farmers shared with me how satisfying they find their work. Job satisfaction was routinely mentioned as a reason for continuing work in a struggling economy without much financial gain. Although struggling to find her place on the farm, Rachel shared with me how satisfying she finds farm work:

Rachel: It’s very satisfying work. I’ve never had a job that I liked as much as this one. It just satisfies me right down to the core. I don’t know why. It feels like the right kind of work to be doing. It hurts, too. [laughs] I go home and put a heating pack on my back for three hours.

In a different interview, Roy shared similar sentiments about the non-financial rewards and gains he derives from farming. Roy is extremely satisfied by his job as a farmer, and perhaps the overriding theme of our interview was that he enjoys farming more than any other job he’s ever held, and he hopes to farm as long as he can:

Roy: Once farming is in your blood, you can’t get it out. And I do farm for the income, that’s part of it. Because I do pay all the bills of the household. And buy all the groceries and whatnot. That’s probably 50% of it. The other half, part of it is we have to eat, too. I feed our family, our daughters and their husbands, my mother-in-law; I donate a lot of stuff to community food initiatives. In fact, I’m wanting to put a plot out just for them this year, I don’t know if I will or not. And part of it is the satisfaction. I spent 28 years in a factory. [laughs]. I can’t go back into a factory environment. Yeah, I was making big bucks. But I wouldn’t do it again. I wouldn’t. Now that I’m growing full-time, the satisfaction and the
connection for me is when you sell something at market, or you have people come out to the farm and pick their own produce, people just thank you for doing it. “We’re so pleased you’re here.” “You didn’t really have to do this.” “It’s a freezing cold day, or 95 degrees, and we’re just so glad that you’re here, that someone’s doing it, so we don’t have to go to Wal-Mart or Kroger to get it.” They know where their food comes from. I’m hearing more and more of that and it does make me feel good. The biggest thing, because I’m such an outdoorsy person anyway, I don’t care if it’s -20° or 95°, I want to be outside. You’re out there working and you’re all by yourself. And you hear the turkey gobble. You hear the hawk. You hear the crows. You hear the bluebird. Fresh air. Being outside. It’s everything together. It’s not just one thing.

In calculating his financial gain from farming compared to other industries or jobs, Roy shared with me a financially-comparable job without job satisfaction:

Roy: I figured it up one time, well, more than once; I can go to McDonalds or some place and make $8 an hour. And probably make about the same amount of money that I do now as a farmer. But do I want to work in a stinky, greasy place that smells all the time? And you gotta drive there, and blah blah blah right on down the line. There’s no satisfaction in there.

Organizational communication research has examined the role job satisfaction, organizational identity (Cheney, 1983), organizational commitment (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987), and even spirituality (Sass, 2000) plays in creating organizational culture and individual meaning as organizational members. While spirituality did not play
a direct role in participants’ explanations of their viewing practices, at least half of the farmers interviewed mentioned God, religion, and/or spirituality. In one example, Brad shared with me his views of how his spirituality plays a role in his work as a sustainable farmer:

Brad: I’m a spiritual person. I’m not religious, but things happened to me along the way in life. I got exposed to real food, good food. I worked at this really cool summer camp where we baked bread, we had a garden. It was the summer after freshman year of college. We did yoga and stuff like that, and tai-chi, and it was this whole idea of holistic health, which I think is valuable. My dad’s an alcoholic and growing up in an alcoholic household where people are mentally ill where there’s just this constant living with this mental illness; I guess my whole life I was growing up with this idea that you need to find solutions to these problems because everyone is suffering. I think that’s a big part of who I am, growing up in an alcoholic household. I guess I just really believe in this oneness of life. I’ve had some mystical experiences, let’s put it that way. You realize that your perspective on reality is not always the same. And that’s what you do with yoga. That’s what you do with religion. Possibly. Or it can be your spirituality. That’s why I call myself spiritual. I don’t go to church. But I really care about people. I really care about community. I care about myself. I care about my family. And health. And I just feel like growing up with people who are suffering and it’s self-inflicted suffering, there’s so much healing to be done. And I think healing is so satisfying on multiple levels. Before that summer camp, I wasn’t getting exposed
to different ideas. But that summer camp was based on peace and cooperation. And after that I just started to get involved, and you think about what people are saying. You think about food. If all of these fossil fuels have helped our population balloon, okay; and if these fossil fuels are a finite source of energy, just think about, okay, does this make a lot of sense? What are we gonna do when it costs too much? We can’t use all these chemicals to grow food. What are we gonna do? Where’s the food gonna come from? It can be overwhelming. The global problems. So that’s where I guess I kinda tagged onto this idea that my lifestyle, my choices, that’s how I change the world. You don’t change the world, you change your part of the world and then hopefully you can slowly influence more and other people.

Throughout these interviews, the motives behind why farmers choose to farm the way they do began to emerge as a complex picture. Farming, an industry that appears to be rather homogenous, is proving itself through this research to be extremely complex and meaningful for many, yet simultaneously filled with dialectical tensions and competing desires. Many farmers explained their dual roles as a business owner and operator, but two farmers in particular mentioned how they see themselves as obligated to the customers to grow what farmer’s market customers want, and to have it available to the customers every week. Image 6 depicts farmers selling to customers in cold, snowy weather. Dwight explained his strategy to me about how he tries to run his stand at the farmer’s market like a supermarket enterprise:
Dwight: One of my strategies in vegetable growing is season extension; I try to keep the items I’m growing on the table at the market as long through the season as possible. Succession planting. So every week there’s spinach and lettuce. Take for example, spinach. Spinach is hard to grow in the summer. Usually my summer plantings of spinach are very poor. Yet I continue to plant it anyway. It’s not cost effective, it’s a waste of time, I know this is wasted space, and yet I’ll at least have some spinach on my table. And people who really want spinach, really, really want it, and know if they get there early they can get some. Most of the other growers quit growing spinach in the summer. But I know some customers want it, and maybe they’ll keep buying from me when everybody else has it too. You go to the supermarket – this is the supermarket mentality people have. You go to the supermarket, everything is always there. All year around, of course. So that’s the mentality people come with. So I’m just trying to copy that. To the extent possible.
John, a farmer who is working to grow grains to be incorporated into the local food system, explained his identity in different ways. While I’ve personally witnessed him working to unload a combine, harvest black beans, and grow amaranth, John perceived his identity to be the “thing” that occupies the majority of his time. As with most farmers, planting and harvesting is but a small portion of their work. As John explained:

John: Generally, the thing that occupies most of my time and is most related to farming is doing the research and coordination and work for developing the infrastructure, network, and a system for farming, harvesting, processing, value-
adding, and marketing staple foods, i.e., grains, beans, and oil seeds. Grown locally or regionally, processed regionally, and marketed regionally. And I think probably, at the core of it, I’m just a concerned citizen. In a way, I guess I’m an activist. And its taken the form of being like a college activist, where I held meetings, poster-making sessions and we went down the street and I wrote editorials in the paper and I meet with people and debated and chanted in the streets and you go to D.C. and chant in the streets, and it’s more like an occupational activist. I think I’m more of a concerned citizen and activist. And the farming, and milling, and hauling, and writing, and grant-writing, and coordinating, and meeting, and demonstrating, and presenting, and speaking, and all this stuff is the form it has taken rather than chanting.

Mary shared with me her paralleled experience to John’s in that much of what she does falls in multiple categories, as well as it being a new enterprise in her life. Mary too plants and harvests grains and crops, but also includes her broader perspective of life and learning during our conversation of how she explains her role in farming:

Mary: It’s a novel experience for me to be working on something that has to result in a business. Where my work and my money-making work is actually from farm to table. That’s my work. Farm to table. And all the pieces in between and making a business so that farm to table can happen. That’s pretty novel for me. But it’s not novel enough to keep me engaged by itself. The engagement is really about why I’m doing it. And I’m sure it’s like that for most people, but maybe we don’t often talk about it… And I feel like I’m aspiring to be a farmer. I don’t call myself
a farmer because that’s not really where I’m getting my income from. And I’ve done farming for income, but that was like 3 years of market gardening. So it feels like, now that I’m doing this and I’m talking to people whose whole life is farming, even if they’re working off the farm, it’s just a different mindset and different culture than the one I was in as a market gardener. So I feel like I’m aspiring to be a farmer but I see myself more as an activist.

Natalie: Do you see yourself as a leader?

Mary: Yeah. A leader and a follower. When it comes to things I don’t know, I’m a follower, so I feel like with this project it’s really interesting to me because it’s causing me to do things I knew nothing about before, in terms of what the on-the-ground pieces are. And so it allows me to go to people sincerely, authentically, wanting to learn from them. It’s not just a device like anthropologists use, like putting yourself in the position of the student and you’ll get more data from the group you’re studying; for me, it’s really true. I think it also just kinda connects to the way I communicate with people, particularly with men who are like farmers or mechanics; for years, I never had my car worked on by anybody where I didn’t sit with them and learn everything about what they were doing and got to know that person. And it feels like that same kind of thing, people who come and dig up whatever stump with their backhoe, I’m out there with them saying, “Can I try that?!?” and it fits with that piece of my nature.

Natalie: To be connected?
Mary: To be connected, but also to really just sincerely express that I recognize that you are really fucking smart and I can learn something from you by taking a couple of hours to hang out with you while you do what you’re doing. And I really like that it makes us all work together. I like that kind of leadership. But I really don’t like the kind of leadership where people put one person in the position of expert, and then everybody turns to him. Because that kind of leadership is very isolating and ultimately self-destructs. That’s my opinion about it. This is really good. I like it.

Mary touches on the integrated nature of farming and that, like most farmers, the majority of her work does not happen in the field. Mary and John spend hours going to meetings, writing grants, traveling to conferences on permaculture and connecting with others around the country trying to grow food in a similarly sustainable vein. Also, a good portion of time is spent researching and reading. I spent a great deal of time with Mary and John, and Mary would often be poking her iPhone while John poked under the hood of the pick-up truck they shared with another family. I’m not sure I ever saw Mary or John in a state of rest. In all of the time I spent with them, they were always moving, talking, strategizing, and thinking. I spent a day in November 2009 with Mary and John after I returned from a national communication conference. Mary knew I was out of town for a few days, and as we drove out to visit another farmer, they pumped me for information I learned at the conference. Although both have college degrees, neither were communication majors yet they found my discussion of parent and child privacy interesting and engaging, and we ended up talking for over an hour about how parents
either respect or violate their children’s privacy. Of all the farmers I spent time with, I spent the most time with Mary and John. I fully view them as a farming family, yet their daily actions and motivations dictate them to broaden their self-description.

Of the identity and succession planning questions and discussion I engaged in with farmers, the legacy left to future generations as well as our own mortality was a common theme. I began to wonder if it’s the nearness of nature’s cycle that reminds farmers of their ultimate passing. Sarah, a farmer who did not look a day over 40, disclosed to me that she is 60 years old and thinks regularly about her future:

Sarah: And see, we see change coming too, because of our age. I’m not going to be able to do this in 20 years. Probably not even in 15. And so I have to be beginning to prepare now for my … for weakness. Which I’ve never been weak. I’ve always been strong. And, but I have to be realistic. I’m not any different than anybody else! I’m gonna age. And I’m gonna die. And there’s gonna be suffering. So I better be starting to think about that and start to prepare for that now, in my mind and in my heart, so when the time comes I can gracefully accept that and deal with it. And if I can’t, I will suffer greatly.

Natalie: But…that’s a big deal what you’re talking about.

Sarah: Yes, of course! It takes years of practicing. And you have to be able to accept its inevitability. And accept its normalcy. It’s completely normal. And the more you fight it, the harder it’s gonna be. And the more suffering you will undergo.
During my interviews with farmers, I was frequently given pieces of advice, suggestions on books to read (of which I’m creating a list and am putting on my reading list for the next year), recipes, tips on how to prepare certain foods, frozen packages of meat, and opinions on the government, family members, previous employees they did not like, and life in general. Most farmers brought up environmental responsibility during their explanation of farming methods. Roy specifically suggested ways in which everyone could be more environmentally responsible:

Roy: I personally think, if in your general life, if you’re not a farmer, or let’s say you are a farmer, in your general life, do you recycle? Do you try not to waste? Don’t dump gas down the drain. Don’t throw bottles out the window. Try not to drive as much. Try to buy locally. Use your common sense, folks. What is good for you and good for everyone? Because you’re living and your kids and your grandkids are going to be living here, too. It’s just common sense, people! Don’t mow 20 acre yards. That’s probably the one biggest thing that burns me up in this world, people who mow these big yards. It’s a waste of energy, a waste of time, and that ground could probably be used for something else useful! But anyway. That always gets me fired up. Anyway, I always had a large garden, a ½ acre garden to feed families and neighbors and what not, because we don’t eat the stuff in the stores. [laughs]. We can our own stuff, freeze our own things, shoot our own meat. The only thing I can say is, eat right. Because it makes all the difference in the world. Take care of yourself. Eating right does make a difference in your body. I know.
Roy disclosed to me after the interviewed officially ended that he was struggling with tennis elbow and a pulled muscle in his leg. Roy continued talking about the importance of health insurance but also the importance of taking care of yourself. Roy advised me to put flat leaf red kale in as much food as I could stand. “As much of it in as much stuff as you can stand,” he said. Perhaps it is my appearance as a young, white, blonde woman who has shared that I come from a farming background; perhaps it is the age range of the farmers I spoke with, most of who are around the age of my father; for whatever reasons, I left most interviews with suggestions on how I could better eat and better live.

A pervading theme I heard in farmers describing and explaining their identities was the independent mindset that is so common to the mythic farmer perception, yet tethered to the local community, which ties back to Rushing’s (1983) dialectic of independence and community. As I examine the politics of food in this dissertation, I realize that most farmers, while they have issues with the government and policies surrounding food, view their role and place on this earth as superseding the government. These farmers described their lives as though they believe they will be able to, no matter what, feed themselves and survive in the event of a government apocalypse. Whereas the politics of food on a national and global scale begins with the growers who produce the food, the farmers I interviewed were, for the most part, comfortable in their farming and survival skills.

“No farmers, no food”: Organizing around the interdependence of food

Food is symbolically powerful because it is a necessity for survival and because it is no longer a widely (locally) accessible and equally produced resource. Because
food is an absolute necessity in a commodity-driven market, it serves as a central
and tangible trace of the dominant ordering of social relations. In the
industrialized west, where food slips into image, into the imaginary, it becomes
necessary for lifestyle, rather than sustaining life. As the means of producing food
and the value assigned to its production are increasingly split off from
consumption, food becomes less and less about its substance and the relation of
that substance to subsistence, and becomes more available for signification. In a
saturated capitalist economy that signification must be controlled by market
forces precisely because of its importance to everyday life. (Cooks, 2009, pp. 94-
95)

Food has encountered a public and tumultuous existence in the past 20 years.
Diets endorsed by physicians and celebrities, such as the Atkins Diet and South Beach
Diet, direct our nation on how to eat and in what frozen section to buy their food. On a
recent episode of public opinion-influencer Oprah, author Michael Pollan talked about
his personal food choices and his new book, Food Rules. Following Michael Pollan was
actress Alicia Silverstone discussing her book, The Kind Diet. Both Pollan and
Silverstone stressed the importance of eating fresh, “real” food. As Pollan suggested, try
to avoid foods your great-grandmother would not recognize (e.g., yogurt in tubes;
Twinkies) (Pollan, 2009).

With more awareness and education on the effects of genetic modification,
hormone use, and growing practices, the general public is becoming increasingly aware
of their food. While the percentage of national income spent on food has decreased from
18% in 1960 to 9% today, our health care costs have increased from 5% in 1960 to 17% today (Pollan, 2009). Due to this exposure from books, documentary movies, news reports, and public responses to food scares, the public dialogue and concern for our nation’s food quality and security is only growing. The politics of food is drawing from past, present, and proposed growing strategies – especially when following the power, control, and money.

In an effort to retain more value from their farming efforts, the farmers in the Appalachian region are motivated to add value to their product. The “value-adding” shortens the chain from producer to consumer and puts more cents per dollar in the farmer’s pocket. Examples of value-added food include turning milk into cheese, milling grain into flour, and turning fruit into jam. In mainstream grocery stores, a very small portion of food’s retail price actually goes to the farmer. The processor, distributor, and retailer exponentially increase the price of the product. When the farmers process their own produce and also serve as the distributor and retailer, their profits increase ten-fold. There have been shifts in the distribution and processing chain throughout past decades, but for reasons mentioned above, including the cost of fuel, suspicions of food sources and growing practices, and concerns about the relationship between food and health, public trends seem to be moving toward a demand for locally-grown, processed, and distributed products.

This dissertation is entitled ‘good food’ for reasons that arose from interviews with farmers. I realized that different groups of people described good food differently. Many farmers and community members kept talking about ‘good’ food in terms of local,
fresh, ethically-grown, responsibly-produced, environmentally-sound, chemical-free, non-GMO, hormone-free, and nutritious. Foods considered ‘not good’ were foods with enriched bleached flour, processed with corn syrup, packed in bags and shipped across the country, ripened with the aid of chemicals and gasses during shipping, and non-nutritious. As Mary described her efforts of helping local populations access ‘good’ food, her concerns were rooted in sociological problems:

Mary: I just think it’s really important that people have access to food that’s nutritious. And we have an incredible obesity, heart disease, and diabetes rate. And you look at any poor region in the country and that’s what you’re gonna see. You have to take some leaps, I think. That’s why we’re growing these crops. Because they’re good crops. Good food.

Mary spoke to the economic and social issues that plague Appalachia and other notoriously poor parts of the country. Brad echoed similar sentiments in sharing his perspective on ‘real’ food and the local food movement:

Brad: There’s an instinctive need to get some real food here. And people want to get farmers around them. It’s like a survival type of thing. They realize we can’t just be trucking all this stuff around forever, something’s gonna have to give. And if something gives, we’re screwed. I think that’s where farmers and farmer’s markets can help; that whole idea of community food security.

The past, present, and future of food is tied up in political tape. The cost of fuel is politically driven; fuel is needed to ship food across the country. For 98% of the country, 98% of the food is grown beyond a 300 mile radius. The quality and nutrition of food is
becoming a great societal concern. Food education for consumers is growing in importance. Modifying the crops and food with hormones, genetic modification, and chemicals is resulting in problems such as soil degradation, polluted waterways, and increasing numbers of food allergies. For some of these problems, Mary believes educating the public could be a simple solution:

I remember nobody knowing what tofu was. These things have been kind of common place for almost anybody; even if they’re not eating it, they know what it is, they’ve had it, and I think that the same is true for these lesser-known crops. As someone once said to me, ‘I can’t eat that, I don’t know what it’s like!’ And, ‘It might not taste as good as what I’m used to!’ And I’m saying, “God! If you can get yourself to eat junk food all these years you certainly can get yourself to eat healthy food!” Think about it! Think about how you’ve been scammed with junk food. Well, let us scam you with this! And people kind of think about that. I said that to my brother-in-law last week, and he was like, “Huh. You’ve got a point.” And he started eating the food I brought to the Thanksgiving dinner and he was like, “this is pretty good.”

Food quality and access to an abundant supply are equally important. Ideally, everyone would have open access to good food. However, it will take a great deal of effort and pressure to see the nation’s food situation change drastically. I was talking to Dwight and his family about the necessary events that could institute such a change:

Dwight: Where’s the food gonna come from in the future if what farmers are doing now isn’t viable? Well the thing is, we function in the present food
economy, but when these changes which I’ve described happen and they are
demanded by the consumer, and energy is too expensive to continue it, I think
whoever is farming at that time will be quite ready to change. They will change.
When they see the market change, they’ll change with it. When they see the local
supermarkets asking for food and saying, “Here, we’ll pay you this much for this
food, that’s more than the corporations are paying for it,” the farmers will change.
It wouldn’t take much to make them change. When the market and economy starts
developing for local foods, for people, for farmers who farm conventionally, then
they’ll change. I’m doing it ahead of time. People like me are doing it ahead of
time. And this county and area is doing it ahead of time.
Natalie: So are you hopeful about farming in the future?
Dwight: Yes. It’s an absolutely essential industry. [laughs] No farmers, no food.
Dwight has targeted the final theme of my research study in that the farmers, who
essentially are struggling for independence from the larger system, are ultimately
interdependent with each other in creating a cohesive local food system that is co-
supported. The consumers need access to food, and the farmers need consumers to
purchase their food, and the farmers need each other for there to be a strong market. The
infrastructure necessary to create a farmer’s market as strong as the Athens Farmer’s
Market has taken 40 years – but the survival of the market (and each farmer) is dependent
upon farmers being part of the market so there is a market. For example, Brad recounted
to me how he joins the Wednesday markets, which are not as profitable, but he wants to
be there so the structure of the Wednesday-Saturday market schedule stays strong:
Brad: I think this farmer’s market is the hub of the local food economy. It’s my biggest customer. Saturdays are obviously bigger days; I can cover all my bills with what I make at the Farmer’s Market on Saturdays. But I’m here to support the Wednesday market. I don’t want to have to drive to Parkersburg or Columbus to join other markets; I like how close Athens is. I want Wednesday to get bigger. The more different vendors, the more people we will have come out.

Examples of belonging and organizing in an interdependent system, such as Brad’s, illustrate the complex nature of farming. However, the overarching paradox is the farmers’ struggle for independence from the market mentality while clinging to the interdependent nature of local food systems. According to Benson (1977), “paradoxes set limits upon and establish possibilities of reconstruction for a system” (p. 16). Many of the opportunities and possibilities afforded to these farmers because of the global market and bureaucratic system are the same binds that constrain the farmers. As many of the farmers mentioned throughout interviews, the problems farmers and Americans are facing are problems of our own doing. Because we have created a globalized food system, food is now more affordable and available than ever; however, this accessibility comes at a high cost, often paid for by healthcare providers, the demise of small towns, and the growth of dominant agriculture corporations which do not necessarily have the consumer’s best interest as their number one priority. As Stohl & Cheney (2001) stated,

The webs we weave will come to constrain us. Paradox delimits options for participants in a system, particularly if there is little awareness of what is happening. Paradoxes of participation are neither good nor bad, across the board.
Moral and practical assessments of them must be attuned to specific situations. (p. 352)

By living the paradox of achieving independence through interdependence, one would guess that competition exists between farmers to sell more or have more competitive prices. I quickly realized an absence of competition from the farmers and their families. Carol spent time explaining the concept and perception of ‘competition’ and the interdependence of a food market such as in Athens:

Carol: Farming to me isn’t competition because we need food to feed everybody. We’re actually a whole team, and some people ask us about the other farmers in the area and the competition, but if all of us farmers came together - conventional and organic - we would not be able to feed Athens County. All of us. And there’s a plethora of farmers in this area. Truly, in actuality, we wouldn’t be able to feed one county. And that says a lot. And it scares us. We need more farmers. We have people who want to start farming come up to us and say, ‘I’m thinking about this idea and that idea,’ and we encourage them. We don’t get scared that they’re gonna be our competition, we actually encourage them to do it, and if we can help in any way, we will. Basically, we want to be able to feed Athens County. We need more farmers, period.

Many families I spoke with echoed similar thoughts, and most families were very encouraging of new farmers starting up. While some families were optimistic about people wanting to begin farming, other families, such as Dwight’s, speculated what it would take for farmers to actually start up:
Dwight: So, even though there is a lack of new people getting into farming, I’m sure they’re gonna come along. Because it’s a job that needs to be filled. We have generation after generation of young people coming along. Surely some of them are going to see the value of farming and want to get into it. And also, the present food system is so highly dependent on high-energy inputs, from fossil fuels, from oil particularly, and the price of oil will continue to go up. And it will make the large farms less and less efficient which will spur the growth of small scale farms like this. And I expect to see that change come soon. I always say, ‘What would it take to really fuel the local food movement?’ $10 gallon gasoline. That’s what it will take. The vast majority of food in Athens is shipped in from far away. Processed, and shipped. If the local farms in Athens were to replace, just, say the fresh produce in the summer, it would take 100 times more farms than there are now. 100 times more farmers than there are now, in Athens. Just to replace the shipped in produce in the summer. But you’re not gonna get 100 more people starting farms unless they’re sure that there’s gonna be a market. And there’s not gonna be a market until we have $10/gallon gas. And, foods in the supermarket are too expensive. So, it’s the chicken or the egg thing.
Image 7. Shocks of cornstalks drying in field during Amish harvest.

The drive to connect with other farmers and build an interdependent system of local food transcends socio-economic divides. Many of the farmers I interviewed are working with Amish and Mennonite farmers in the area to grow certain types of crops that the Amish are known for growing organically, such as buckwheat and heirloom corn. Image 7 depicts heirloom corn stalks drying in a field after the farmer’s young sons cut the stalks and stacked into shocks as a drying method. For both the Amish farmers and English farmers, the driving force to produce good food takes precedence over cultural
differences. John, who works closely with the local Amish on growing practices and produce auctions, explained his goals of community and interdependence:

John: It’s a cool community connection thing. The Amish economy has, for a while, been integrating and working with ours. And it is an easy route, to let them grow it and buy it from them; they love it. To them, it’s great economy. And it works really well for us.

I was able to interview the Amish farmer John most closely works with, and through discussing the Amish farming practices, I heard notes of the organic movement come through our discussion, although the Amish are not certified organic farmers. Trace minerals, the health of the soil, building soil, farming without petroleum-fueled machinery, and using lime to treat fields were all mentioned as farming practices of the Amish. Interestingly, the Amish farm, for reasons influenced by their religion and family teachings, similar to organic farming practices, yet their product, good food, is similar to organic farmers and readily consumed by local communities. This example of interdependence illustrates that while farmers seek independence from bureaucratic constraints, interdependence is ultimately the foundation of a strong local food economy.

In another example of connecting different cultures and socio-economic groups, Brad works with neighboring poor people in his county to pick local fruits and nuts from trees grown indigenously in the woods of southeast Ohio. For Brad, this stimulates the local economy because he is locally sourcing his materials and goods to later add value to, yet supporting his neighbors and stimulating the local economy:
Brad: Some of the crops we work with we buy from other people, and we’re kind of part of the local hillbilly economy as I call it. [laughs]. We’re on the county border down here, and there are always people who need economic opportunities, so we buy walnuts and stuff from other people. And then we do the value-added processing part. I feel like we have a lot of fingers in a lot of different areas. I’m really interested in community because I feel like sustainability is a community concept. You’re not sustainable by yourself. Sustainability is a system, like an eco-system. And economically, the farmer’s market is a perfect example of a community system that’s financial. We buy stuff from really poor people and people who are trying to make just a little extra money and they like being out in the woods finding and picking the nuts and plants. There’re a lot of really good things that happen when we work together. It provides economic opportunity for basically desperately poor people. And their families have land, so they have access to the woods. I look at what I do as providing jobs. That’s where this whole idea of solutions comes from, and that’s part of my whole mission statement in my business plan. And it’s coming up with these sustainable solutions. I feel like they are economic but they’re biological. And they’re people, too.

After talking with Brad, I looked up his farm’s website on the Internet. As part of his mission statement, his website reads: “We are dedicated to providing delicious, nutritious and out-of-the-ordinary products that come directly from the farms and hills of Southeastern Ohio. Your purchase is a vote for sustainable agriculture and the family
Brad explained more about the local food system, community, and barriers to generating a sustainable local food economy:

Brad: I think the local food movement that we’ve got going on around here is doing well. We could do better. I think that people want cheap food. As cheap as possible. I think that holds up some restaurants from maybe purchasing more local stuff. I think we’ve got a lot more going on for us around here than a lot of places. It would be really hard for people to do what we’re doing around here somewhere in bumfuck Ohio. Because people are not into the community thing. They think, ‘Oh, ok. If I just go to Wal-Mart, it’s cheaper.’ But they don’t think about their neighboring farmers. It’s about the whole local recycling of money. Plus, I have a facility and we do the value-added processing, so by selling direct to the customer, we get almost all the money, where otherwise you would have the processors, distributors, the retailers, and so you got the farmers at the bottom of the ring. If you’re just selling commodities, it’s really hard for farmers to make it. But then if you can be the farmer that does the value-added processing and you sell direct marketing to the customer, that’s where the farmer’s market is so awesome because you’re getting the best deal, and also, the customers are getting the best deal because they’re getting the highest quality products at pretty reasonable prices.

A predominant crop discussed in the interviews and a predominant ingredient in the current food wars happening in the nation involves the (ab)use of corn. In talking to the farmers in the Appalachian region, they explained that corn has been genetically
modified and structurally changed so that the starch is larger to produce more corn syrup. Foods that are processed often use a sweetener derived from corn. An eccentric farmer spiritedly gave his perception of the role corn has played in this nation. While I was discussing corn with Bob and Sarah, Bob called corn “the Indian’s revenge”:

Bob: Corn is gonna go down kicking and screaming. It’s a hell of a productive plant the way they grow it now. You can grow a tremendous amount of feed on an acre of ground with corn now. It’s the Indians revenge!

Sarah: Right. It destroyed the health of the land and the health of the people. The Indian’s revenge. They gave it to us.

Bob: And their neighbor gave them the small pox, they gave us corn. The Indians just said, ‘This is gonna take a little bit longer to kill you…. but you’ll get addicted to it!’

Sarah: You’ll learn to love it! You won’t be able to get along without it!

Bob: Pretty soon you’ll all be fat and have diabetes!

Sarah: And you’ll have a heart attack!

(Bob and Sarah both laugh maniacally)

Regardless of personal beliefs about food, growing practices, politics, religion, and lifestyles, the farmers I spoke with were in agreement that it took the support of each other for any farm to succeed. The interdependent nature of food systems complicates the independent nature of farmers. In order for there to be independence from national food chains, the farmers and community members need each other, thus making food a very interdependent variable of community. Throughout the interviews, I heard many different
examples of supportive organizations or groups of people who were central to laying a foundation for the local farmers and the local food economy. Some of these organizations included a nearby university, a small business incubator, and a leader of a nearby commune. There is an undeniably unique quality to this southeast Ohio area, and through exploring what that unique quality was, I found the connection to community:

James: What makes us so unique is our diversity. Small farm agriculture. In Athens County, we’re much more diverse than if we were in the western part of the state or another large Midwestern state. The Midwest large scale production model doesn’t fit here, so we have small farms and park farms. The niche type of agriculture that is going on, and the value-added and direct marketing, is all really exciting. I hear all the time when I go to conferences and people ask where I’m from, and they say, ‘Oh, Athens County is really unique!’ [laughs] And I suppose that reputation for uniqueness probably has to do with the academic community, with the university. You get people who have come to Athens to go to school, they like it, they stay here, so, some of that uniqueness reflects the educational backgrounds. And then people just being unique which has shown up in the entrepreneurial spirit that we have here, with all the value-added and niche marketing.

The diverse population and diverse cultures combine to create a community that welcomes diverse perspectives and alternative farming practices. Many of the participants referenced an older man who doesn’t farm as much anymore but who has taught and introduced alternative farming practices to many current farmers. The support
in the town to help new farmers start up is tremendous, although the farmers recognized the difficulty of entering farming as a first-generation farmer. Dwight explained how farming on a small scale can be done cheaply, but the work is hard, there isn’t a great deal of financial security, working outside in the summertime is hot, wintertime is cold, and you have to have some type of capital to start with. The process of entering farming can be daunting, and to a certain extent it is much easier for a person to walk into an established business and ‘get a job.’

While there are obvious obstacles to make farming the newest popular career, farmers remain optimistic about their role in the community and about the future. Part of the security of their job and business is that everybody eats. However, while everyone needs food to live, many farmers, like Roy, make their farm an all-day family affair by welcoming people to come pick their own produce and enjoy the nature of his farm:

Roy: For about six weeks during early summer, we have about 500 or 600 people come through the farm and pick. They don’t all come at once. Some people come through three or four times in a month. We offer different fruits and we also have broccoli, cabbage, beets, lettuce, potatoes, and a few other things ready at the same time. So they can get whatever they want. We try to make it a family affair. We have groups that come out, they’ll spend the whole day, they’ll eat their lunch, they’ll take a nap. It’s a quiet environment. Nobody’s gonna bother you. I don’t mind it at all. Like I tell them, just don’t step on everything, and be careful.

The embodied experience of welcoming people onto a farm and allowing customers to pick their own food is a connection to food that younger generations are
simply unfamiliar with. Yet, the interconnected nature of “good” food is just that—interconnected; there is no interconnection in buying cereal in a grocery store. As Joel Salatin (2004) reminds us, good food is food that will eventually rot, and cereal is virtually indestructible.

In Pollan’s (2009) rule book on food, he repeatedly encourages critically examining the connections between food, people, health, and the environment. Like Salatin, Pollan (2009) promotes eating only food that will rot, and he recommends eating this food at a table; not a desk or car. The connections we make (and lose) with food come from eating activities such as food delivered to us through a car window and seeing food advertised on television. Pollan (2009) strongly recommends avoiding both eating habits. Instead, focusing on the connection of where the food came from, what the food provides the environment and your body, and reap the benefits of being more closely connected to your food (Pollan, 2009). Mary is a strong proponent for getting people involved with the food they eat:

Mary: I feel like one of the things about this from a social change perspective is different than when I was fighting coal mining or the war in Vietnam or the war in Iraq; there are some people who are interested in hearing about those issues, but everybody eats. Everybody eats. And you can really get people involved. If you get people into enjoying what they’re eating and talking to them about the politics of what’s going on there, they suddenly are interested in environmental issues, economic justice, all of these things that they weren’t interested in before. I think that’s a compelling piece of it.
If and when people become more interested in what is being sold in the grocery stores and served in restaurants, the market demands will change. However, the changes will likely come by an increase in the income percentage spent on food. We may see the percentages of the 1960s return, and our nation may increase their spending on food to 15%. Many people argue that organic food is more expensive, and that poor people cannot afford good food, but Rachel was very clear when she told me she doesn’t sacrifice good food or flinch at paying money for good food, “I don’t look at prices when I’m buying food. Poor people smoke cigarettes, they don’t care how much they cost. And I’m poor, but I like to buy good food.”

James forecasted what it will take and what the responses could be to changing our food system:

James: Consumers are going to drive basically what’s going to happen. Even that farmer I mentioned early on said he will do whatever it takes to farm right now; if things change, he said he’ll think about making changes because he wants to farm, so he’ll use whatever farming system is out there. So if our society is going to decide that farming is going to be lower input, it’s probably going to require that we’re willing to pay more for food or we’re willing to pay for some system in place where the farmer makes a decent living. If the farmer can make a decent living, now you have a sustainable system, we can start moving generations onto that farm and passing those skills on. It’s going to come down to some of these alternative techniques in farming and policy to make some of those changes. But,
yeah, I’m optimistic. At the end of the day, everybody still has to eat. Somebody’s going to have to produce the food we eat.

The interconnections between farmers, community, and consumers run paradoxically to the independent nature of farmers. Yet the dialectic is altered in communities such as these where the farmers are urging more people to join their network of good food. In the typical market mentality, everyone is independent from one another; and in the southeast Appalachian area, people need each other and are reaching out for that interconnectedness. Brad summed up his view of community and interdependence:

Brad: Sustainability is the way of the future. We really believe in community, we really believe in family. It takes time to set up systems in order for them to be sustainable. It’s gonna take our whole lives to set it up, and we don’t want to let it fall apart or sell it to somebody, but wouldn’t it be great if our family could take the ball and run with it. And there’s lot of stories like that. I think the way we’re planning things is slow and gradual. We’re not trying to get as big as possible as fast as possible. We’re not trying to get $1.5 million to build the next facility; we might do that eventually, I’m not saying we won’t, but our kids will be older. They might be involved with it.

Farming in Appalachia and across the country looks much different than it did 50 years ago. But as with any industry, time brings changes. The farmers who participated in this study spoke out vocally about their opinion of those changes. The meaning of *good food* is currently contested in forceful ways I was not expecting to find. Although I grew
up on a farm, I was exposed to many new ideas and introduced to many new ways of life through spending time with these farmers. The desire to be connected competes with the desire for independence. The contested meanings of good food were illustrated in many ways, and this is important as food is a basic necessity of life. Some of the tensions discovered through this research include: who gets to decide what good food is? Who is it that farmers want to be interdependent with, compared to who they want to be independent from? Whose interests are being privileged when you shop at the grocery store? What brought farmers to this complex and complicated career? How do farmers articulate problems yet retain their enthusiasm and job satisfaction? The farmers are in agreement that consumers drive the food markets. When and how do consumers learn about farming? Do consumers know where their food comes from? Do they care? These are just some of the tensions and dialectics that arose through studying farming and food.

The paradoxes, constraints, tensions, ironies, and contradictions that emerged in this study are non-traditional in terms of existant organizational communication research. Whereas the local economy comprised of these farmers could be studied as an alternative organization, there is very little organizational discussion, participation, pressure, loyalty, or control that would traditional come from the leader of the organization. Instead, these farmers cooperate in an informal local economy that is independent of other farmers and other economies, yet interdependent with other farmers and other local economies. This independent-interdependent dialectic complicates the experiences of the farmers in their efforts to collaborate and cooperate with other farmers to establish a local food economy.
The elements that make farming profitable both enable and constrain family farmers. Independence and interdependence are competing tensions farmers routinely negotiate. In wanting to stay independent in their farming practice and continue to farm, farmers in the Appalachian area must come together as an interdependent group to create the market in local towns where they earn a great percentage of their yearly income. The interdependent nature of farmers in Appalachia differs greatly from mainstream farmers who sell commodity crops directly to elevators and grain companies. The interdependence necessary in Appalachia is informally organized yet carries a strong culture. The interviews with farmers told me what farmers value and what their goals are, yet there is no formal organizing structure where they come together to work towards those goals.

What we know about organizational communication is rooted in the structure of an organization. Classical and scientific approaches to organizational structure as well as human resources approaches all examine organizations and the communication within as a formally-interrelated group of people (Tompkins, 1967). Whereas policy manuals dictate formal modes of workplace communication, downward, upward, and horizontal communication is situated within a larger structure (Goldhaber, 1993). Organization members know when communication is upward or downward due to the structure of the organization.

The results of this dissertation challenge assumptions about organizational communication. While the farmers and those farmers who sell at the Farmer’s Market do not belong to a formal organization, evidence exists of a strong organizational culture of
farming, deep identification with farming as an occupation, and informal forms of support for other farmers. Feminist approaches to organizational communication structure account for less formal structures and more cooperative organizing, such as cooperative support organizations (see Harter, 2004). Cooperative support organizations are boundary-spanning organizations that, “help their constituent cooperatives survive by consolidating resources in order to better engage with organizations in a larger bureaucratic system” (Harter & Krone, 2001, p. 90). As a form of alternative feminist organizing, cooperative support organizations help create and strengthen a system or infrastructure that helps a collection of individuals organize themselves around a main goal while retaining their independence and individuality. One of the most identifying characteristics of cooperative support organizations is the formal process of voting and decision making. Whereas the Farmer’s Market has appearances of a cooperative, there are no routine, formal decision making processes.

Even including participatory forms of organizing as an alternative form of community or cooperative form of organizing does not fully illustrate the connections between and communication among the local farmers. According to Stohl and Cheney (2001), the participative component is contributing to a group’s decision and abiding by the group’s decision. Again, no formal group or organizational communication exists among the farmers.

An example of the informal communication amongst farmers in the Appalachian area involves the location of the Athens Farmer’s Market. Due to the cold winter months, the market is only held once per week, on Saturdays. Some of the farmers wanted to
move inside the local strip mall to be warmer and hopefully attract more customers. Some of the farmers wanted to stay outside because of tradition and visibility from the road. The communication about this decision happened through the grapevine, and the decision was made on the first Saturday morning of January when some farmers went inside the mall and some stayed outside. No meeting or discussion occurred, and no leader told the farmers what to do. The farmers made their choices independently yet the interdependence necessary to maintain a strong farmer’s market did not change.

This study presents a community of farmers who challenge assumptions we have made and knowledge we have acquired of traditional organizational structure being central to significant productivity. The formal system through which messages flow in an organization is understood as a structure (Koehler, Anatol, & Applbaum, 1981), yet there is no visible or mutually-agreed upon structure for the organizing of local farmers. Deetz (1992) considered structure, size, and power of an organization when gauging the level of significance and impact on the general public; yet, these variables do not apply here. Organizing is clearly happening, and many would argue that significant impact on the general public is made by farmers.

While not all organizational communication literature approaches organizations as “containers,” (see Cheney, 2000, 2001; Deetz, 1992), this study finds a strong product of organizational communication (significant profit and success of the farmer’s market), without a formal or alternative structure of organizing. While some organizational scholars are approaching organizations from different perspectives, more needs to be
learned about the organizing practices of organizations such as farmers and farmer’s
markets.

Another unique result of this dissertation is the combined placement in social
movement theory and organizational communication theory. While neither body of
literature lends a complete lens to examine this collection of farmers, concepts from each
theoretical foundation help to explain the communication happening between farmers and
society. Traditional foundations of social movements involve an element of oppression or
a demand in ideological change. As Bowers, Ochs & Jansen (1993) explained, most
social movement agitators (demands for change met with resistance) involve grievances
and alleged violations of human rights and moral principles.

Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) lend a more fitting frame to understand the social
movement initiatives of local farmers outside of a formal organizational structure. As
they posit, social change from an organizational perspective involves differentiating
organizations and organizing:

An organization is composed of a group of individuals who engage in
interdependent cooperative actions. Organizational members take inputs
(materials, energy, and information) from the environment, process them, and
return them to the environment as outputs. …However, the term organization is
used in a static fixed sense without taking time into account. Organizing, on the
other hand, refers to the process-oriented, time-varying nature of the behaviors of
members in an organization. …In essence, an organization results from the results
of organizing. (Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2006, pp. 36-37)
Studying the civic and community-based role farmers in the area play, I see strains of organizing and organizational literature paired with grassroots social movements literature, but the intersection of farmers and their interests to build a local food system lie somewhere in the middle. The farmers do not claim to be oppressed or severely marginalized, and there is an absence of formal organizational structure. Instead, I find that farmers in the area are content serving as environmental and food social movement activists.

As stated earlier in Chapter Two, while not all people active in their community want to be seen as community activists (Shragge, 2003), many nonviolent forms of resistance (including the efforts of Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez) are respected if not revered by the local community. This is seen evident by posters of Martin Luther King, Jr. and quotes by Cesar Chavez in area businesses, all touting messages of social movements.

The results of this study do not fit within one specific body of literature, which I find illuminating and worthy of continued research. However, one clearly emergent issue that demands attention is the highly contested meaning of good food. Instead of farming, food and relationships were central themes in the interviews; as I continued to find this odd, I realized that farming is the vehicle to food and relationships. The farmers in the area do their farm work for the end results of food, relationships, community, and health. Whereas this study is about farmers, the farmers are about the health, vitality, relationships, and connections within their community. In order to continue their independent work as a farmer, they must ensure and protect their interdependency.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The food culture in Athens is unique because there aren’t many diversions in Athens. They only thing we have when we’re in Athens is each other. Right? We have nothing else. There’s nothing here. There’re no diversions. You have the natural area and we have each other as far as socializing or depending on each other for our entertainment, and so because of that, we socialize and know people far, far more intimately than you would in bigger cities. Here, food is a way of life because there’s nothing else to do. So you end up networking and socializing and finding common interests and bonds, and food is a main one of those. I think the food culture is so strong in Athens because of our isolation and the variety of people that are drawn here because of the university. You know, it gives us such a diverse mix of people who are really interesting, really food-oriented, maybe culturally or whatever it might be, but we’re kind of all tossed together. And so, it makes for a phenomenal interaction. Athens has a culture – it’s a food culture. And that definitely colors the way local people look at the food system. There’s a heightened awareness in Athens of local food that’s far greater than many other places. And I would acquaint that to small pockets in California where that movement got its first popular start, and I think we’re very similar in that fashion.

–Jeff, baker & community member

Jeff’s reflections regarding the uniqueness of the rural community in Appalachia took me back to my childhood, as did many other parts of this research project. In my family, holidays and parties showcased food as the main attraction. Food was used to
communicate a great deal in my house. A welcoming invitation to guests and friends through an elaborate, special meal, or, as my memory clearly recalls, a simple, basic meal for (unwelcomed) boyfriends. Special meals marked homecomings from college and farewells to new jobs, but food was more than just sustenance for survival: food was used to say hello, goodbye, get well, thank you, and convey sympathies.

As a child, I remember my mother preparing lunches to take to my father in the field. She would take care of us three children in the morning and prepare my father’s noon lunch. She would load my brother and sister and I into the car and we would all go out to field to take our father his food. Lunch often included hamburgers made from local beef and pounded into patties at home, packed in foil to retain their warmth, precisely made iced tea, fruit salad, and a huge slab of whatever cake, pie, or treat my mother had made that morning or night before. Food sometimes consumed our whole day: after getting home from the field and cleaning up from making lunch, preparation would begin for the evening meal (which I call “dinner” and my father calls “supper,” leading to intentional confusion when planning meals).

My mother taught me how to bake when I was in 4-H as a child; yeast dinner rolls, made-from-scratch brownies, rich chocolate chip oatmeal cookies. Of the many cookbooks I now own, the two I use most are from my hometown: a county bi-centennial cookbook comprised of neighboring families’ best recipes, and a cookbook my mother made for me comprised of her original and altered recipes. The foods in both cookbooks represent my childhood and the culture of where my story began.
This dissertation, in many ways, is a personal exploration of my childhood. Although I grew up on a farm in the United States, the lives and experiences of the farm families in Appalachia are drastically different than mine. I now realize how strongly contested food production and distribution methods are by different people, and how widely contested farming practices can be, with the same end result of producing and eating food. My father is a conventional grain farmer, my brother-in-law works for Monsanto, and many participants in this study expressed derision toward both occupational choices - yet everyone is concerned about the health of our environment and the availability of food.

Theoretical Implications

Contextualized within organizational communication literature, family farms are highlighted as organizations standing at the intersection of family communication, environmental communication, social change, community advocacy, and farming. While a great deal of research on each of these areas exists, a unique contribution of this project is how each of these diverse topics is brought together to form a multidimensional perspective for understanding how family farms in Appalachian organize themselves in light of and in spite of these tensions. Here I will examine the significance of findings in this study and key theoretical implications by addressing the research questions from Chapter two with concepts, themes, and issues that apply to each. Through addressing these research questions, I draw connections between family farmers, organizational communication, identity, and the environment.
Research Question One

The first research question asked: How are environmental issues understood and enacted by farmers? The second theme, “The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth”: Politics of Scale and Appalachian Family Farming speaks directly to the environmental stances of farmers, and the third theme, “I’m not a farmer yet. Just learning.”: Negotiating Agricultural Identity also addresses farmers’ perspectives of environmentalism.

‘Environmental issues’ for the farmers who participated in this study ranged from federal subsidies to soil quality to promoting seasonal eating. While the range of issues was extremely wide, what struck me again and again was the force with which these farmers discussed their beliefs.

Studies show communication within a traditional farming family includes succession planning (Pitts et al., 2009), family decision making (Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1989), and communication about farming perspectives between generations (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1991). All of these family elements were consistent with Appalachian farming families who explained their understandings of environmental issues through these contexts. Additional environmental issue pervading the interviews was the about food quality and food sources

As an industry that has great influence on a family’s life, family farmers exhibited to me an intense identification (see Cheney, 1983; Scott, 2007) with farming, even if they didn’t see themselves as a farmer quite yet. The intensity of occupational identification was described to me as starting from an early age or growing gradually; unlike other occupations, there was no definite moment where individuals instantly saw themselves as
farmers. Part of the strong identification comes from the vocational socialization (Jablin, 1987) into farming, which is quite different than joining other organizations. Current literature on vocational socialization considers information and knowledge collected during childhood and adolescence about work, but clarifies that the details of vocational socialization are limited to forming impressions of a job, not the specific details of the work (Jablin, 1987; Vangelisti, 1988). Farming is quite different, as children are socialized into the actual farm operation details at a young age, thus reaffirming and strengthening their identification as a farmer. The perspectives and attitudes adopted by farmers on farming and environmental issues are attributed to parents and previous generations, which follows the intergenerational nature of farming (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1991). This study revealed that vocational socialization was more intense for children and adolescents who grew up in a farming family than current vocational socialization literature posits, as both the impressions of farm life and the actual details of work were revealed to the participants who grew up on a farm.

Many of the environmental issues and beliefs recounted throughout the interview process came from family history and previous generations, reports from world news media sources, books, formal education, and personal opinions about what is sustainable, good and healthy for the earth and body. One of the primary environmental issues discussed in the second theme is the concern for future generations. A common question I heard was, ‘What kind of land will be left for the next generation?’

The farmers who participated in this research enacted their stances on environmental issues through their farming practices. For farmers concerned with soil
quality and future generations, organic farming practices aligned with their desire to minimize chemical inputs and grow food in ways that mimic nature as much as possible. I quickly learned about ‘NPK,’ which is the abbreviation for the fertilizer combination of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, and how to take soil samples to test for amounts of macro and micro nutrients. Beliefs about types of fertilizers and ways to fertilize land differed greatly between farmers. For farmers concerned with providing food as cheaply as possible to as many people as possible, technological advancements in the agricultural industry are viewed as a blessing.

Food quality and food access was another issue discussed by farmers. Farmers concerned with the lack of locally-grown food are growing as much food as possible and encouraging neighbors and other people to begin farming, no matter how small. Foods good for our bodies and good for the specific topography of Appalachia were endorsed by nearly all farmers. Some grains, such as amaranth, are perfectly suited to the climate and soil quality of the Appalachian region. Pairing highly nutritious grains with compatible topography is a commonly encouraged practice, regardless of the profit margins.

A final dominant environmental issue I noticed throughout the entire data collection process was minimization of consumption. As one farmer told me, “We’re old hippies. Consumption is uncool.” The homes of the farmers were basic at best: two families had composting toilets, one farmer had solar panels, most homes were heated by wood, one family did not have electricity, and two families built their own modest, small home. One farmer mentioned her belief that the idea of buying clothes brand new is
ridiculous when you look at the amount of available second-hand clothes. Many families mentioned “not being rich” but followed with not needing much and happily living quite cheaply.

Through examining how environmental issues are understood and enacted by farmers, I learned a great deal about how farmers developed their understanding of themselves as farmers and their impact on the environment and political issues. What is most unique about farming is that participants reported the onset of these ideas at earlier ages than other types of organizations. The ways in which the farmers understood the environment relied heavily on family communication, both from an early age through vocational socialization and from an intergenerational perspective.

Research Question Two

The second research question considered: What challenges do Appalachian farming families face as they organize their farming operation? The first theme, “It’s fucking democracy!: The democratization of farming” highlights struggles, tensions, challenges, and paradoxes farmers face and directly addresses the second research question.

Of the various challenges farmers shared, one consistent opinion among participants was that farming must stay agrarian and family-managed instead of industrialized (Barlett, 1993; Headlee, 1991). Capitalism, a primary culprit of former farming crises such as during the 1980s, remains as one of the biggest threats to the future of family farming (Dudley, 2002). As the government becomes more involved with regulating farming and direct marketing practices, farmers wrestle with the
encroachment of government and incorporation of agricultural technology which threaten their perceived independence while recognizing their interdependent need for community (Jellison, 1993). Appalachian family farms report multiple struggles, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions, and many of these challenges include health insurance, government regulations and policies, weather and climate fluctuations, and farm succession planning, which are issues that have haunted farming and have been unsolved for over 30 years (Neth, 1995).

Of the numerous tensions and struggles farmers regularly confront, health insurance emerged as a primary and influential challenge to farming families. Due to the increasing cost and importance of health care, many families have one member who works off-farm to bring in corporate health insurance for the family. In some cases, families pay out-of-pocket for independent self-employed health care, which can cost up to $1,500 monthly for two people. Other families simply do not have health insurance. Health insurance is a primary hurdle discouraging new people to begin farming; in this day and age living without health insurance is financially risky. Currently, there is no national health care plan for farmers. The incentives and benefits for new people starting to farm as their occupation are sometimes outweighed by the high cost of health insurance.

Government regulations and policies are another area of significant challenge for rural Appalachian farmers. Due to the small scale of farming in the hilly region, many farmers do not farm enough acreage to garner considerable government subsidies or aid. Some farmers benefit greatly from grants and start-up dollars to implement intensive
grazing or care for fresh water sources. Other farmers, however, seem to be continually challenged by government regulations concerning small farmers and direct selling to customers. As policy currently stands, a farmer cannot raise livestock, kill livestock, butcher livestock, and sell the livestock by himself or herself. A certified butcher or abattoir (slaughterhouse) facility must process the meat in order for retail sale to customers. This presents serious frustration for farmers who farm organically, as very few butchers in the area are certified organic. Because of this, farmers must haul animals long distances to an organic facility, which increases the cost-per-pound of meat. One young farmer expressed interest in building his own certified organic abattoir, but recognized the problem of taking on too much and increasing the size of his operation too quickly.

Another challenge farmers face is that of accountability and documentation. Whereas organic farmers have increased accountability and must complete extensive paperwork and documentation of farming practices, conventional and non-organic farmers have enjoyed considerable freedom in their farming operation. Due to recent problems of food containing harmful bacteria, often called “food scares” by the media, (sm)all farmers are now being forced to be more accountable because of their direct marketing. The government wants to be able to trace food sold at farmer’s markets to what chemicals or processes that food went through; while this serves the customers well, some farmers view the extra step of documentation burdensome enough that they consider opting out of selling their produce to the public.
Weather and climate fluctuations are an element that is entirely out of human control yet extremely influential to the success or failure of growing crops. As one farmer told me, there is an old saying that you can survive a drought but not a flood; a farmer might have some crops in a drought, and can still make hay, but not in a very, very wet year. One way farmers have responded to the challenge weather presents is through high tunnels. I learned that high tunnels, as well as low tunnels, are sheets of plastic stretched over metal frames like a tunnel to protect strips of land. In large high tunnels, farmers can drive a tractor through the tunnel; in a small low tunnel, farmers can only crouch down to pull weeds. A farmer can raise the plastic for ventilation, or close in the event of frost or high wind. Drip irrigation lines create a controlled watering system, which prevents both flood and drought. Many farmers believe high tunnels are the way to farm because the growing conditions can be more controlled, and at $1,800 per high tunnel, they are rather affordable. Larger farms, with maybe only 25 acres, might have seven or eight high tunnels and then three or four greenhouses. The primary difference between a high tunnel and greenhouse is high tunnels are not heated or cooled, whereas greenhouses are a controlled climate with heat and cooling.

Farm succession planning is a challenge for most families. Nearly all families expressed concern to me about who would take over their operation when they are unable to continue farming. Factors to consider when debating a farm’s succession plan include equality of inheritance, choosing family members to continue the farm, whom to sell the farm to, how much to ask per acre, and how the current farmers desires the land to be worked in the future. Detailing the succession planning of a farm is a challenge as old as
farming, yet must be addressed regardless if the farm is to survive multiple generations or not.

Many of the challenges Appalachian farming families face is directly related to their quest for independence yet their reliance on the interdependent nature of family farming and local food systems. Most formal and alternative organizations, and even cooperative support organizations, have an organizational structure that clearly sets forth the goals and the mission of the organization, which are relied on to provide solutions to challenges and obstacles the organization encounters (Harter & Krone, 2001). The challenges Appalachian farmers face are more difficult to negotiate due to their organizational independence, yet their interdependence on each other is what leads to their farming and financial success.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked: What cultural values drive the farming practices of families in the southeast Ohio Appalachian region? Organizational culture applies to family farming particularly in the context of examining what values drive practices, from where those values come, and what those values mean to family farming members. The passing of family values and preserving the culture of the Appalachian area were repeatedly presented as priorities (albeit paradoxes and tensions) of farming families in Appalachia. Key cultural values that families mentioned include environmental ethics, legacy, environmental responsibility, religion, and family.

The cultural practices and values that drive farming practices are developed through communication processes (Jablin, 1990). In southeast Ohio Appalachia, these
communication processes occur among connected family members and neighboring farmers. Approaching the organizational culture and cultural values of Appalachian family farming from an interpretive perspective allows me to examine farms as cultures and how this culture is communicated (Putnam, 1983; Sypher, Applegate & Sypher, 1985). The values that drive farming practices in Appalachia are heavily rooted in family and environmental ethics. As described by Smircich (1981), organizational culture is the shared subjective network of meanings made possible to organizational members, or in this case, members of farming families. The subjective meanings of ‘environmental ethics’ and the importance of family are created through the communication occurring within and among farming families.

While farming as an occupation is already known for having a strong stereotype and culture (Rushing, 1983), the farmers in Appalachia report belonging to a culture that has evolved from a virtual counterculture to an acceptable way of life that is rapidly spreading (Trice & Beyer, 1993). Many of the farmers reported knowing they were considered ‘hippies’ or as one farmer exclaimed, “crazy people,” for their radical or alternative opinions on farming (Rauber, 2009). The cultural values that drive family farming practices in Appalachia closely follow the slow food movement (Petrini, 2007) and awareness to sustainable farming practices (Schlosser, 2009). While these overarching cultural values initially dictate farming practices, localized cultural values (such as family and concern for community) were also cited as contributing heavily to the cultural values that dictate farming practices and agricultural decision making.
Many farmers, especially the female farmers and wives of farmers, specifically mentioned the importance of understanding the role humans play in the surrounding ecosystem. I often heard farmers say, “We want to leave the ground better than we found it,” and other messages of taking responsibility for the environment and serving as a guardian of the ground. I found it interesting that women were most frequently making these kinds of statements.

Legacy played a very large role in farmers incorporating cultural values into their farming practice. “We are very concerned with what we will leave our future generations,” was a common theme of farmers, especially if the farmers had younger children or were working a multi-generational farm. Many farmers were anxious about how a farm would succeed through the future generations and what type of farming methods would be employed on their farm after they were gone. I was very sensitive to farmers discussing issues of their farm’s succession plans; many farmers hope their children would take an interest and want the farm, yet they will not demand their children to continue the family farm if they choose to pursue other occupations.

Environmental responsibility emerged as a predominant cultural value that drove farming practices for the farmers who participated in this research. As it will be further discussed in the fourth theme, environmental responsibility included everything from not using more than you need, not taking more than you can give back, recycling everything you can, and protecting as many resources as possible. While many farmers cultivated the land or grew pastured animals, the surrounding woods and timber were included in the discussion of their farming strategies. The trees serve as wind breaks, fruit bearers, and
fencing materials. Working hard not to waste was a common theme, whether it be composting rotten produce, introducing pigs onto a farm to eat the rotten produce to produce manure, or giving away excess food to area food banks. Having large piles of recyclables at the end of their driveway, composting as much as possible, and contributing as little to landfills as possible were all badges of honor among the farmers.

Religion and family were values that played a tertiary role in the families’ self-described personal values, although I had earlier anticipated they would play a more dominant role. As one farmer put it, “God gave us these seeds to grow, and that’s what I’m here to do.” Similar to religious movements, many farmers referenced the political movements of the 1960s as their personal inspiration and impetus for entering the farming life. Family values were recognized as reasons to enter and remain in the farming business. For many families, the farming lifestyle allows for an income and time at home with family members simultaneously.

While the southeast Ohio Appalachia farmers expressed interested in and follow many tenets of the slow food movement, the cultural values which drive the farming practices of families in the southeast Ohio Appalachian region are somewhat modified from the international slow food movement model. The slow food movement promotes the preservation and consumption of indigenous foods and farming methods in a given ecoregion (Petrini, 1986). The slow movement privileges environmental ethics and food preservation, whereas the families who participated in this region exhibited more concern for family and community while still practicing in ways consistent with the
broader movement. Valuing the localization of food production, family, and community was placed ahead of environmental values to the surrounding ecoregion.

Examining the cultural and organizational values that influence farming practices sheds light on how organizational culture can be used to enculturate new farmers into the agrarian vocation (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). As stated by Schein (1985), “culture is a basic pattern of assumptions… that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 9). For these participants, the basic patterns of assumptions directly revolve around and are derived from family.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question examined: What does environmental responsibility mean to farmers? This is perhaps one of my personal favorite research questions because the answers are drastically different depending on the type of farmer. Environmental responsibility, much like good food, is interpreted differently based on basic beliefs and principles regarding farming. Environmental responsibility is different for organic farmers than for conventional farmers.

While we already know that community and local organizing for social change is complex with unique structural issues (Shragge, 2003), many farmers explained their understanding of environmental responsibility by directly relying on the writings of Berry (1977, 1986) and Pollan (2006, 2009). Writers like Wendell Berry and Michael Pollan are working to spread a new understanding and rhetoric of environmental responsibility: a rhetoric specifically targeted at bringing people close in the name of social change rather
than alienating (Bowers, Ochs, & Jensen, 1993). Many farmers recounted simpler sentiments of being mindful of the environment and remaining aware of their place on this earth (Killingsworth, 2007).

Of all the stories and explanations shared by farmers, a primary reoccurring statement about environmental responsibility was giving back more than you are taking. As Barb (an organic vegetable farmer) stated,

*I think it’s an outgrowth of this same responsibility that all of my generation grew up with which is you make things better for the next generation. You don’t take, take, take; you give, give, give; well, you take a little. You don’t want to leave things more depleted; you either want to make no mark at all, or you want to make it better. You can’t make it better, that’s okay – but don’t make it worse.*

*Make no impact is sometimes the best you can do.*

In addition to improving the quality of soil and growing conditions, some farmers mentioned basic responsible lifestyle measures as environmental responsibility, such as not throwing trash out of a car, recycling what you can, and making good decisions that take the environment into account.

Organic farmers are primarily interested in growing methods that most mimic the course of nature. Opting out of using pesticides, insecticides, or genetically modified seed, organic farmers are concerned with the health of the soil (including earthworm population), air, and water. Providing their market customers with produce that is free of genetic modification, hormones, and chemicals is of their utmost importance in farming in an environmentally responsible way.
Conventional farmers, however, tell a different story. Farmers such as my father who choose to use genetically modified seed apply fewer chemicals to their fields compared to 30 years ago. Also, due to genetic modification, tillage is less necessary which protects and encourages the growth of the topsoil. Due to chemical-resistant seed, the waterways are less polluted from agricultural runoff, more top soil is being retained, and the population of earthworms is increasing due to no-till farming. This is all made possible due to genetic modification, although public and farming opinions of genetic modification also differ greatly. Conventional farmers view their environmental responsibility as applying as few of chemicals as possible to feed as many people as possible. My father has often commented that conventional farmers get no pleasure out of applying expensive chemicals to their fields, and if for no other reason than cost alone, farmers want to apply as little as possible. By improving the waterways, health of the soil, and reporting higher yields which feeds more people, conventional farmers stand strong on their farming beliefs and environmental conservation methods.

The understanding of environmental responsibility by the farmers who participated in this research has roots in social movement and environmental justice, yet these farmers approach it in a reverse way of typical social movement initiatives. As illustrated by Bowers, Ochs & Jensen (1993), many social movements stem from violations of moral principles with elements of emotional arguments. Uniquely, while the farmers in southeast Ohio Appalachia see the need for social change with our food and farming practices, they do not start symbolically or with emotional arguments. The farmers begin with the very corporeal action of growing and selling food locally, and
only after do they look for ways to reach out and spread their perceptions of social injustices and violations of their moral principles. In terms of how social movements are typically studied (see Tarrow, 1998), the farmers in Appalachia operate in a reverse way from the typical order of traditional social movements.

Research Question Five

The fifth research question explored: How do farmers understand their world? The initial answer to this research question is illustrated in theme four, “No farmers, No food.” Organizing around the interdependence of food. This theme addresses the interconnected nature of food, farming, community, and identity. Striving for independence from federal regulations so farmers may be interdependent and succeed in their farming efforts to establish and sustain a local food system was the primary lens through which farmers explained their stories of farming to me.

Many farmers were very honest about being unable to separate the public debate about farming from their own farming identity, enacting what Cheney & Thompkins (1987) described as an ongoing battle between a person’s own expression of their identity and others’ interpretation of what it means to identify as a farmer. Farmers understood their world through agrarian terms (Montmarquet, 1990), actively linking themselves to farming as both occupation and identity; this active connection is but one way individuals further identify with surrounding organizations (Cheney, 1983).

The farmers who participated in this study shared many stories with me, mostly involving a life and career in a world of food. More specifically, farmers strive to live in a world of good food. Farmers eat what they grow, share their produce, sell their goods,
try to introduce new crops and foods, organize buying clubs, encourage more people to
grow food, and educate the public on an array of food-related issues. Eating ‘right’ was
attributed to many health benefits, including aging gracefully. While food is the overall
mission of the farmers, farming is their livelihood.

Being a farmer is an occupation, career, and job that becomes a life identifier.
Engineers, mechanics, accountants, and teachers are all dedicated to their work and work
hard at their jobs, but their ‘day job’ does not define their life. For farmers, their job
defines their life. Their life and world is understood through weather patterns, livestock
habits, growing seasons, and beliefs about what is best for the populace and environment.
Farming is not only a job, but a way of life and a lifelong commitment at that.

The third way in which farmers understand their world is through community.
While farming is notoriously an isolated and individualistic lifestyle, farmers have very
collectivistic needs so as to continue their operations. Relying on community members
and businesses to purchase the results of their farming efforts is paramount to keeping
these farmers financially viable. Due to contracts with restaurants, specialty shops,
grocery stores, produce auctions, the university, and the farmer’s market, there is a
greater demand in the county than the farmers can supply. The consistent demand and
reliance on these outlets assures farmers of next year’s income. Additionally, much of
what farmers plant and grow is dependent upon what restaurants order, so in a way the
community drives what the farmers grow. This interdependence defines the life of
farmers in the southeast Ohio Appalachia region.
Interestingly, the role of gender in farming operations, which has been the focus of previous agrarian family research (see Neth, 1994; 1995), did not arise in this research as a facet of independence or interdependence. Gender and agriculture has been critiqued for stereotyping women into domestic ideologies (Neth, 1995), although women are equally vested in and active on the farm as their male counterparts. For the families who participated in this research, all but two of the male farmers had female farming partners who helped manage and complete work on the farm. Even throughout the course of group interviews, gender was not introduced as a predominant tension within farming families.

What emerged as one of the more complex tensions while farmers explained their world to me was the strong connection to the social identity of their occupation (Scott, 2007), but the inability to escape the mythic qualities attributed to the public understanding of traditional farmers (Rushing, 1983). The results of this tension are alternative, new age, ‘hippie’ farmers who do not at all enact the mythic, stereotypical qualities of farmer, yet very strongly identify with the environmental tenants of farming (Cheney & Thompkins, 1987). Consequently, farmers who do not meet society’s image of a traditional farmer (Rushing, 1983) are sometimes heard differently (e.g., negatively, or dismissed) by the public compared to farmers who embody and act the part of what the public understands to be a farmer (Goffman, 1967). An example of this tension emerged when I talked with a family who was very successful in dairy, and they were proud to consume as little as possible. This family followed many ideals of the ‘60s subculture, were innovative and financially successful, and spoke passionately about environmental issues. However, during a conversation with another community member, the dairy
family was referred to as ‘crazy’ and on the outskirts of reality. While the values of the dairy family and the community member were not very different, the presentation of the dairy farmers as hippies seemed to damage the weight of their voice.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this dissertation are many and varied, and are situated in organizational communication literature, environmental communication, family communication, and the practical field of farming and community organizing. The individual family farmers who represent the local food economy in this rural Appalachian area belie what we know about the structure of traditional and alternative organizations. The farmers have appeared to succeed without collaborating their goals and values, yet they are happy to encourage new farmers and learn new skills from each other. This dissertation teaches us about a sector of the population that operates in a highly informal but successful way by both setting trends and responding to the needs of the community.

Instead of pitching high-price advertising campaigns about the benefits of supporting their farms, these farmers stick to the simplicity so representative of the agrarian myth (Rushing, 1983).

The farmers are responsive to the wants and desires of the community, yet the communicative exchanges of these desires happen in fleeting moments at the farmer’s market or a quick conversation in the local natural food store. While some farmers may set up specific times to meet, there is not even a skeleton of a traditional organizational structure to be found amongst these farmers. What this means to organizational communication is that perhaps the flattened hierarchy (or in this case, absence of) typical
of work teams can be applied to groups of people who operate in individual but collaborative ways. Seeking out and studying groups of outliers such as these could provide clues of their success as well as suggestions for other areas desiring a stronger local food economy.

From a practical perspective, the farmers in this study are working very hard at promoting local foods and their environmental ethos. Even with their lack of organizational structure, farming is financially viable for these families, yet I question whether a stronger form of interdependent organizing (while remaining independent) could streamline advocacy work and create better representation for their own individual goals. Since there is no one mission statement or collective values of these farmers, creating “representatives” seems counterintuitive; yet, many farmers spend a great deal of time speaking to the public and I wonder if communicating about these outreach events could spread people in different directions to reach more people. For example, many farmers are active in farming organizations, such as the Ohio Ecological Farm and Food Association, and also Innovative Farmers of Ohio; the farmers in the area could centralize their education and involvement in these organizations to reduce the advocacy workload of everyone.

The food and farming situation in this country is becoming critical. The contested meanings of good food are only growing more heated; people are beginning to align themselves and identify with political perspectives and social ideologies which are slowly beginning to divide the country. To continue this research from an organizational and
environmental perspective could shed more light on ways people are talking about food and farming.

Limitations

To me, limitations in research are a sign of structured and well-defined research. One can research anything but one cannot research everything. The limitations of this study include areas to explore in the future and ways to improve future research. While there are steps I would do differently with the help of hindsight vision, I am proud of this research and truly believe in the importance of learning more about farmers and food from a communication perspective.

The initial limitation of this exact study was unavoidable in a practical sense, and I have few ideas on how to “fix” the problem. The problem is this: I began formal observations during summer and harvest, which is an unbelievably busy time for farmers, and I waited until after harvest to ask the farmers to participate in the research. I knew I would not get as high of response rate if I asked them during harvest, and I experienced a high rate of involvement in my study which I attribute to the time of year. I sent cameras to farmers who agreed to participate at the beginning of winter. However, by the time harvest ended and farmers had to time to talk about their farm, there wasn’t much to photograph. I quickly realized that farmers were proud of their crops and wanted to show me pictures of their farm in full bloom, be it spring, summer, or fall. Many farmers opted to email me digital pictures they had previously taken instead of using the disposable camera I provided. And yet, I did not want to bother farmers during harvest with taking pictures of their work, and I would not expect them to comply. The money-making time
of year is not when they have time to voluntarily participate in research. As such, many of the pictures taken during December were of barren trees, dormant gardens, and bundled family members. While I was thrilled with all and any pictures, I realized the farmers would have liked to showcase and photograph their farm during a more picturesque season. I have yet to successfully negotiate this issue.

Additionally, spending all four season in the field with the farmers would have afforded me a more intimate and complete view of each farm’s operation. Many farmers invited me out next spring and summer to help transplant seedlings, pull weeks, or pick produce. Getting the opportunity to work next to the farmers would have been complete participant observation, yet the time frame of proposing this project and seeing it to completion did not allow me a full year to spend in the field collecting data.

The informal organizational structure in which the farmers organize their efforts is an area I wished I had further explored during interviews. Not until halfway through interviews did I realize that most of the organizing through the farmer’s market and restaurant contracts was organized informally and apparently only by word-of-mouth. This unique form of organizational and social networking interests me as an organizational communication scholar, and learning more about this alternative way of organizing presents possible suggestions to strengthen other local food economies.

Finally, I question which voices are absent in this research that could complement the farmers’ voices. Customers of the farmer’s markets and more community members of diverse backgrounds would supplement farmers’ perspectives to create a more holistic perspective of this specific community. Also, there are farmers who do not participate in
the farmer’s market due to distance barriers and isolation, and virtually nothing is known about their experiences, struggles, and perceptions. Interviewing members of the state department of agriculture would also potentially prove illuminating, as many of the beliefs, policies, and procedures discussed in this dissertation do not tell the other side of a hotly debated story.

Directions for Future Research

I am fascinated by farmers. This research has only enforced my respect for farmers and fascination with how farmers think, act, and live. I strive to conduct research with practical contributions to the general public, not just for academia. My goal in my research is to complicate issues as I seek to explain others. In my quest to understand more about farming families in the Appalachia area, I’ve discovered additional areas to explore in the future. I want to continue studying aspects of small family farming, both in the rural Appalachian region as well as other regions of the country where small scale farming is on the verge of extinction. I question what economic and social differences exist in different regions. Local food economies are starting up in many areas of the United States and continued research on successful local food economies could create suggestions or models for starting new economies.

Other alternative food initiatives, such as edible schoolyards, are possible directions for future research. Having greenhouses or space to grow food on school grounds is an upcoming trend, due to the enormous demand of food and resources that schools require. The local university alone serves 20,000 meals per day when school is in
session, nine months out of the year. Attempting to locally source food to fill that demand creates a unique local economic situation.

Part of filling the demand for local food is directly tied to the number of farmers in a given region. I would like to further examine the role organizational culture, socialization, and identification play in building communities or families of farmers in areas where there is an increasing number of young farmers. The organizational culture surrounding farming is strong, and the ways in which the values are given meaning and communicated to others is extremely compelling and worthy of continued research.

Applying organizational communication concepts, such as culture and socialization, to concepts in environmental and health communication could increase our understanding of how we create meaning about what is good for the earth and for our bodies. The growing area of environmental communication is a direction I hope to move towards in the future. The environmental communication division is rapidly growing, yet we do not know much about the communicative functions of how we organize around environmental issues and initiatives. The ways in which we talk about the environment and come to know our reality regarding the status of the environment is of particular interest.

Ultimately, more research on farmers and farming is needed. This dissertation marks one of less than ten communication studies conducted on farming and food in the past ten years. And yet, everyone eats. Our food situation in the United States has changed dramatically in the last decade, and there is more to be learned about the effects of those changes.
Personal Reflections

Throughout my time spent in the field collecting data, I was able to keep myself separated from the farming families and return to my home, my sanctuary, and process what I had experienced when visiting farms and talking to farmers and their families. My data collection continued with ease until the day I saw a baby in a basket. The baby in the basket must serve as a complex representation to me, as I was deeply affected by the image of an eight-week old baby in a basket for quite some time. During a visit to an Amish farm one afternoon to collect a supply order for a restaurant in town, I happened upon a baby in a clothes basket atop a kitchen table. I know I did a double-take when I walked into the stifling hot kitchen. I could not help myself, nor could I tear my gaze away from this baby in a white bonnet lying in a clothes basket padded with towels.

After talking about this experience with others, the instance of seeing an Amish baby in a basket took on a representation of its own. The lack of choice in belonging in an Amish family; the dire economic situation of rural Appalachia; the drastically different cultural values than I was accustomed to. Ultimately, the fact that I was collecting data in a marginalized, poverty-stricken area lacking education and standard health care was suddenly unavoidable. As gorgeous as some of the farm visits were, I was now unable to ignore the unpaved roads transporting me to the farms, ramshackle buildings, lack of options for farming children and parents, and other economic and societal signs of poverty. The baby in the basket represented a turning point for me in my data collection and research.
Despite growing up on a farm, I frequently became nervous before visiting a farm and interviewing farmers. I felt a great deal of respect for these farmers, and my own inadequacies and areas of ignorance were presented to me as I hoped to gain the approval and respect of the farmers. I was unsure of how much to self-disclose during an interview, yet through re-reading interview transcripts numerous times, I know that in nearly all situations of my own self-disclosure, the interview was enriched from the reciprocation of information and subsequent trust.

Also, my experiences growing up and being connected to my family’s farm were and still are drastically different than the farms I encountered in my research. Preparing myself to expect anything yet trying to quickly orient myself to the farms proved to be an interesting and sometimes challenging experience. An example of the rapid adjustment to farmers and their homes was presented, ironically, through food. I was fed at nearly every farmer’s house. Unpasteurized milk, pomegranates retrieved from a grocery store’s dumpster, home-brewed kombucha (fermented medicinal tea), home-grown and homemade tomatillo salsa, raw-milk cheese, butternut squash soup, fresh apple cider, fresh pulled pork, locally grown and made black beans and corn tortillas, and perhaps the best chocolate chip cookie I’ve yet to experience were among some of the dishes served to me during farm visits. I was sent home with white butcher packages of pork loin chops and plastic bags of whole chickens which were butchered that very morning. Of everything I was served and given by the farmers, I would eat it all again. In many cases, I’ve worked to replicate the recipes in my own kitchen, some of which were successful and some of which were not.
My personal background played a significant role in the collection of data. Aside from growing up on a farm, I was raised by self-sufficient parents who taught me many crafts and skills (most of which I mocked during my childhood). Knowing how to cook came as a blessing when talking with farmers who were happy to discuss recipes and food preparation; had I not had a working knowledge of cooking, I’m sure the relationship and connection to the farmers would have been different. Also, I gained entrance to an Amish family by discussing quilting and quilt block patterns with the farmer’s wife. Shortly after talking with the wife about quilting and making candies, her eight children were sitting at my feet wanting to join the conversion, perhaps picking up on their mother’s approval of the English stranger in their home. I called my mother when I returned home from that particular interview and thanked her for being my mother.

My teaching has also been influenced by my research, and in many ways telling students about my research with farmers only strengthens my resolve and stresses the importance of studying farming as an occupation and culture. An anonymous comment from a student after class one day read, “No offense, but I’m not really a big fan of farmers. Like, personally, I wouldn’t be able to do it. Farm animals get on my nerves and don’t you have to wake up early like all the time?” While I had an immediate personal reaction to the comment (one of disbelief and laughter), I realized that this student was not alone, and that younger and younger generations are becoming disconnected from their food.
I’m looking forward to owning a plot of land where I can try my hand at gardening and growing food. I need to. I’m itching to plant seeds in the ground. I cannot help but wonder if I am able to grow food, if I have “farmer’s blood” running through my veins. This research project has began what I can only imagine is a life-long inquiry into farming, food, and society. I was struck with the peaceful simplicity of a farmer’s statement about her work, and I continue to refer back to it when pondering my own life’s decisions: “We just kinda like what we do, I guess. We do love growing things.” The debate of the best way to grow food to this country for the good of the most people will be hotly debated for years to come. Paradoxically, the debate is part of the beauty of living in a democratic country such as the United States.

My final thoughts of this dissertation revolve around the ways in which we talk about food, farming, and environmentalism. The definition of good food is different for everyone, but learning more about the privileged parts of the food discussion is extremely interesting to me. Farming is considered the oldest profession, and throughout this research I found the following statement to be true regardless of growing practices, beliefs, and values: “Conscientious farmers are the original environmentalists.” I look forward to learning more about how farmers organize their operations to shape local economies and the future direction of the global discussion about food.
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APPENDIX A: IRB RESEARCH APPROVAL

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

**Project Title:** No Farm, No Food: Appalachian Family Farmers' Cultural Values and Negotiation of Environmental Responsibility

**Primary Investigator:** Natalie Shubert

**Co-Investigator(s):**

**Faculty Advisor:** Scott Titsworth

**Department:** Communication Studies

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Robin Stack, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

08/26/2009

Approval Date

08/25/2010

Expiration Date

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
APPENDIX B: IRB INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: No Farm, No Food: Appalachian Family Farmers’ Cultural Values and Negotiation of Environmental Responsibility

Principal Investigator: Natalie Shubert, Department of Communication Studies, Ohio University

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study is looking at the organizational communication and discussion of cultural values of family farmers in relation to current farming trends, environmental ethics, and government influence. If willing, I might ask to interview you about your current work. This interview will be tape recorded and transcribed. Typical interviews last between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

Risks and Discomforts
There are no anticipated risks to you for participating in this study. However, if you should experience any discomfort or wish to end your participation, you may do so at any point.

Benefits
The benefits of this research include learning more about how farmers talk about their farming practices and how family farms balance competing values. Ideally, the results from this study could help inform other research efforts to help support family farmers and local food movements.

Confidentiality and Records
This interview is completely confidential. Your name will be removed from the typed transcripts, and an alternate pseudonym will be given to you in all future use of the transcripts. The tapes will be destroyed after transcripts are completed; tapes will be destroyed no later than May 2010. In order to manage the electronic data, I will use computer software to help manage the interview transcripts. I will be in sole custody of the computer where data is stored, and the computer is password protected.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Natalie Shubert at ns126906@ohio.edu / 618.406.1955 -or- Dr. Scott Titsworth at titswort@ohio.edu / 740.593.9160.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

---

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions
- known risks to you have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no policy or plan to pay for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this research protocol
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is given voluntarily
- you may change your mind and stop participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Printed Name ___________________________

Version Date: [8/26/09]
APPENDIX C: SCRIPPS COLLEGE PHOTO RELEASE FORM

ADULT RELEASE FOR PHOTOGRAPHY

In consideration of my engagement as a model, and for other good and valuable consideration herein acknowledged as received, I hereby grant to ____________________________ ("Photographer"), his/her heirs, legal representatives, and assigns, those for whom Photographer is acting, and those acting with his/her authority and permission, the irrevocable and unrestricted right and permission to take, use, re-use, publish, and republish photographic portraits or pictures of me or in which I may be included, in whole or in part, or composite or distorted in character or form, without restriction as to changes or alterations, in conjunction with my own or a fictitious name, or reproduction thereof in color or otherwise, made through any medium at his/her studios or elsewhere, and in any and all media now or hereafter known for illustration, promotion, art, editorial, advertising, trade or any other purpose whatsoever. I also consent to the use of any published matter in conjunction therewith.

I hereby waive any rights that I may have to inspect or approve the finished product or products and the advertising copy or other matter that may be used in connection therewith or the use to which it may be applied.

I hereby release, discharge, and agree to save harmless Photographer, his/her heirs, legal representatives, and assigns, and all persons acting under his/her permission or authority or those for whom he/she is acting, from any liability by virtue of any blurring, distortion, alteration, optical illusion, or use in composite form, whether intentional or otherwise, that may occur or be produced in the taking of said picture or in any subsequent processing thereof, as well as any publication thereof, including without limitation any claims for libel or violation of any right of publicity or privacy.

I hereby warrant that I am of full age and have the right to contract in my own name. I have read the above authorization, release, and agreement prior to its execution, and I am fully familiar with the contents thereof. This release shall be binding upon me and my heirs, legal representatives, and assigns.

Description of photographs:

________________________________________________________________________

I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

MODEL’S NAME __________________________ DATE ____________

MODEL’S DATE OF BIRTH __________________________

WITNESS NAME __________________________ WITNESS DATE ____________

WITNESS ADDRESS __________________________
## APPENDIX D: RESEARCH LOG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time in Hours</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Digital Recording</th>
<th>Field Notes</th>
<th>Documents</th>
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APPENDIX E: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MEMBERS OF FARMING FAMILIES

Initial Interview Protocol for Members of Farming Families

Time of interview:_________________  Date:______________________
Place:___________________________   Names(s):__________________
Photographs Used # : ______________

Begin interview by explaining consent form, the purpose of the research, and the privacy of interviewees.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me your story growing up on a farm/becoming a farmer/living & working on a farm. Have you always lived on a farm? How long have you been a farmer / lived on a farm?

2. What are your responsibilities on the farm and what does that all entail?

3. What do you like best and least about living/working on a farm? What are your favorite aspects about the farm?

4. In your own words, explain what life and work on a farm is like.

5. How many people help on this farm?

6. What do you see as the biggest challenges or hardships to being a farmer?

7. Tell me about your growing processes. Do you grow organically or conventionally?

8. Photographs: I have some photos here that you [or your family] took. Can we look at them together? Please select 3-7 of the the most representative or your favorite pictures. I have some questions. Tell me what is going on here. What are you doing here? I do not understand this one.

9. Tell me your thoughts on the organic food movement. Do you think it is a movement, or a trend, or fad?
10. Some critics of conventional farming say that the overproduction of corn, use of chemicals, and use of genetically modified organisms is partly to blame for many social and environmental problems today. What do you think about this?

11. Who are some of the surrounding community organizations that you work with to fulfill your farming responsibilities?

12. Have you seen an increase or decrease in profits over the past 20 years?

13. What do you see are the biggest challenges of (organic) farming and meeting the needs of the community?

14. If you could help me (and others) understand one or two key things about the realities of farming in southeast Ohio, what would those be?

15. What keeps you motivated to continue doing the work that you do?

16. How do you view your environmental responsibility?

17. If you would like me to know anything about the way you farm or why you farm the way you farm, and I haven’t yet asked it, what would you like me to know?
APPENDIX F: INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND NON-FARMERS

Time of interview:_________________  Date:______________________

Place:___________________________   Name:_____________________

Begin interview by explaining consent form, the purpose of the research, anonymity of interviewees.

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your involvement in the environmental sustainability movement/slow food movement / community involvement. What has your involvement been over the years? How did you arrive to this place in your involvement?

2. Do you have a job? Is it in any way connected to environmental interests? What are your current responsibilities? Current goals?

3. What is your perspective regarding the social movements surrounding the environment?

4. In your opinion, what possibilities exist for the farmers in the southeast Ohio area as well as other areas?

5. What are some unique benefits for farmers in the area to be successful?

6. What are some obstacles farmers in the area face in their business efforts?

7. What do you see as the biggest challenges or hardships to being a farmer?

8. What is your involvement with the farmers in the area?

9. Photographs: [if using photographs, introduce and ask about activity in photos]. Please select 3-7 of your favorite photos or the photos you believe are most representative of your experiences and perceptions of environmental work.

10. Tell me your thoughts on the organic food movement / local food movement / global food crisis / role of government in farming today. Do you think these
current issues are movements, trends, or fads? Which issues do you think will only continue to grow in scope?

11. Some critics of conventional farming say that the overproduction of corn, use of chemicals, and use of genetically modified organisms is partly to blame for many social and environmental problems today. What do you think about this?

12. Who are some of the surrounding community organizations that you work with to fulfill your responsibilities?

13. What do you see are the biggest challenges of (organic) farming and meeting the needs of the community?

14. If you could help me (and others) understand one or two key things about the realities of farming in southeast Ohio, what would those be?

15. What keeps you motivated to continue doing the work that you do?

16. Is there anything we haven’t talked about that you believe is important for me to understand your experience or perspective?

17. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so very much for your time. I’d love to stay in touch with you – please call me if you have any additional questions or issues. I can be reached at 618.406.1955, or emailed at nshuber@gmail.com. Thanks again for your time and participation; would you like a condensed version of the results of this project?