

1996

Intergenerational Continuity of the Family Farm: Influence of Parental Aspirations and Expectations for Their Children

Tonya R. Haigh
South Dakota State University

Ronald G. Stover
South Dakota State University

Mary Kay Helling
South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist>



Part of the [Regional Sociology Commons](#), and the [Rural Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Haigh, Tonya R.; Stover, Ronald G.; and Helling, Mary Kay (1996) "Intergenerational Continuity of the Family Farm: Influence of Parental Aspirations and Expectations for Their Children," *Great Plains Sociologist*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist/vol9/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Sociologist by an authorized editor of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

**INTERGENERATIONAL CONTINUITY OF THE FAMILY FARM:
INFLUENCE OF PARENTAL ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR CHILDREN¹**

Tonya R. Haigh
South Dakota State University

Ronald G. Stover
South Dakota State University

Mary Kay Helling
South Dakota State University

Abstract

The decline in the number of young people entering the farming occupation was investigated. Specifically, whether parents are encouraging their children to farm, and the links between encouragement and parental experience on the farm were explored. In-depth interviews with adult junior members of farming families were conducted regarding their experiences with farming, their attitudes about farming, and their goals for their own children. Results give preliminary support for the hypothesis that parental aspirations and expectations for their children are linked to parents' experiences and attitudes towards farming.

Introduction

Despite the importance of technology, corporate control, and

¹ This research is supported by the College of Agricultural and Biological Sciences, College of Home Economics, Northern Plains Biostress Laboratories, and the Agricultural Experiment Station at South Dakota State University.

mechanization in the U.S. agricultural system, the predominant institution growing our food is still the family farm. As the current generation of U.S. farmers reaches retirement stage, researchers are looking to the next generation as critical to the future of family agriculture. Of great concern is the lack of young farmers taking the place of retiring farmers. In the last fifteen years, the number of young people taking over family farms has declined markedly. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of farmers under the age of 25 decreased 50% and the entry of farmers aged 25-35 years old fell by 30% (Gale and Henderson, 1991).

American farm operators are recruited almost exclusively from farming families. The needs for extensive on-farm experience and access to land and machinery helped to make intra-family farm succession the predominant form of farm transfer (Lyson, 1979; Gale, 1993). Thus, family factors and the decisions made in individual households fundamentally affect farm continuity between generations (Salamon, 1993).

Much research has been done to show that farm and family characteristics affect farm succession. According to Lancelle and Rodefeld (1980), whether a farm will be passed to the next generation is determined in part by the size of the farm and the family's socioeconomic status. Further, the number of children in a family is positively associated with the likelihood of producing an heir to take over the family farm and with the ability of an heir to acquire ownership of a viable farm. Finally, Salamon and Davis-Brown (1986) has demonstrated that the family's goals and management strategies also affect intergenerational continuity on the farm. She found that families who "define agricultural success by family farm continuity, implement risk-averse financial practices to meet their goal," (p. 504) while families focused on financial returns and personal achievements differed in their management strategies.

The transfer of the family farm is also affected by factors beyond the family's control. Gale (1993) showed commodity prices, interest rates, and nonfarm opportunities to be factors exogenous to the family which may affect farm success and intergenerational farm transfer. In addition, urban opportunities such as higher status work, better wages, and more desirable lifestyles may pull rural youth away from the family farm, inhibiting intergenerational continuity.

Haigh et al.: Intergenerational Continuity of the Family Farm: Influence of Par
The relative effects of family factors and external factors on intergenerational farm transfers may be minimized or exacerbated through the parent's encouragement of the child to take over farming. Straus (1964) has shown that parental encouragement has a significant effect on the likelihood of children going into farming. However, the question of what causes parents to encourage or discourage their children about farming has not received substantial attention.

Parents' direct experiences and cultural messages have been shown to be two significant determinants of parental goals for their children (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992). A parent's occupation is a significant experience that affects his or her aspirations and expectations for his or her children (Kohn, 1966). Straus (1964) has suggested that farming parents who also participate in off-farm occupations may transmit nonfarm information and values to their children, who are then more likely to choose nonfarm occupations. Educational background also affects parental goals for their children.

Culture influences parental goals for children by suggesting norms and values which may be internalized and reproduced in individuals or families. For example, Salamon (1993) found that the cultural values of family continuity versus individualism and autonomy influenced parental goals for their children in regards to farming.

In this paper, we are interested in the factors that lead to differing parental expectations and aspirations for their children regarding farming. We consider both the aspirations and the expectations that farming parents hold for their children.²

Methodology

The intergenerational study on which this paper is based began

2 Aspirations are defined as goals which are unconstrained by reality; expectations are defined as the anticipation of what is most likely to occur (Scott-Jones, 1984; Finn, 1972). Parents may aspire to having their children take over the family farm, but expect that they will go to college and become teachers or accountants, and not return to the farm. Researchers in child development have shown that both aspirations and expectations of parents for their children affect children's educational and occupational attainment (Helling, 1992; Goodnow & Collins, 1990).

in South Dakota in 1993. Names of farming families that were potential study participants were collected in a variety of ways: from a list of operators of farms that had been registered as being in the same family for over a century, from agricultural professionals, and from interested individuals who had heard of the project. The families were contacted, told about the project, and asked if they might be interested in participating.

Interviews were conducted with members of the families that volunteered. As a minimum, family members of at least two generations were interviewed. The "senior generation" is defined as those in the position of transferring the farm. The "junior generation," consists of the children of the senior generation. They may or may not be operating the family farm.

In all, seventy-two individual interviews from twenty-two families have been conducted thus far. The data for this paper were drawn from twenty-eight interviews with junior generation individuals. The mean age of the junior generation interviewees was 41.3 years, with a range of 29 to 51 years. All of the fourteen couples had children, ranging from toddler to college age.

In each couple, at least one interviewee grew up on a family farm. However, the interviewees varied in terms of how involved they currently were with the farms. Some had taken over the operation, some had incorporated pieces of the land into their own farming operations, some assisted in their spare time, some did not help, and some maintained no connection at all with the farm.

During the interview, each individual was asked to reflect on their goals for their children, specifically about the children's plans related to farming. Participants were also asked about their own reasons for choosing to farm or for leaving the farm, and about their vision of the future of their family's farm.

The interviews were coded on the basis of participants' goals for their children, participants' experiences with farming, and the general attitudes towards farming held by the participants. We found that husbands and wives stated very similar goals for their children. For that reason, here we refer to the goals and experiences of the couple, rather than the individual.

Results

Haigh et al.: Intergenerational Continuity of the Family Farm: Influence of Par
Results of the interviews led us to categorize parents into three categories: (1) those who expect their children to take over the family farm, (2) those who discourage their children from farming, and (3) those who are unresolved about their children farming. Differences among families in each of those categories are described below.

Expect Children to Farm

Out of fourteen couples, only two encouraged and expected their children to take over the family farm. Both couples were currently farming, having taken over the farm from their parents. All four individuals in this category expressed positive attitudes about farming and did not regret having chosen farming as a career.

"I guess I never had thought much about it, but now I would rather be on the farm than any place else."

Keeping the farm in the family was important for both couples. One couple told how their opportunity to farm came from the wife's parents, who invited the couple to take over family-owned land that was currently being rented out to non-family members. The husband stated:

". . . [her father] had always told me, 'if you ever want it, it's yours. I would love nothing better to have it back in the family.'"

The other couple described their commitment to the family in taking over the farm. They stated they helped out their parents and planned to take care of them when they retire.

". . . when Sam³ and I were first married, we kind of took care of his grandparents. They used to live in this house over here. . . you're supposed to just kind of take care of everybody that's around here and help out and

Names of subjects have been changed throughout this paper.

Just as they helped out their parents, these couples said they needed their children's labor to make the farm operation work. One couple, heavily involved in livestock, indicated that their children's labor on the ranch was absolutely necessary.

"I need them, labor-wise. With just me here, or me and dad, we wouldn't be doing what we're doing. . ."

The couples wanted to see their children complete college "as something to fall back on," and wanted their children to feel free in their vocational choices. Most strongly, though, they expected to see their children join them on the family farm, and to raise their own families there.

To meet their aspirations for passing on the family farm, and to help make their expectations come true, these couples were setting concrete goals and plans to bring one or more children into their current farming operation. One family had already begun transferring ownership of land or livestock to their son.

"Kurt will get the land. I'm hoping to make it work for him.... We've given an eighty⁴ to Kurt, just to get him to think he's a farmer. I didn't want him to just think he's my hired man, so I got him into the eighty. He thinks he's kind of committed to maybe a diamond dream. But I think he's still thinking he's going to do it."

The other couple had developed plans to bring children into a partnership in the farming operation.

Both families were dealing with how to support additional families on their current farms. In terms of acreage, the farms or ranches were growing under the ownership of the parents. However, the farms were not large enough (or prosperous enough) to easily

4

An "eighty" is a shorthand way of referring to eighty acres of land, or half a quarter.

support additional families.

Haigh et al.: Intergenerational Continuity of the Family Farm: Influence of Par

"[Our son's] future plans involve coming back to the farm and bringing his wife with him. Our biggest problem now is how to keep two families going."

These parents were considering making concrete changes such as purchasing additional land or taking off-farm jobs to successfully bring their child back to the farm.

"Whether we can get two of them back here or not.... You know, ideally, that would make me happy if they could both come back and farm here or somewhere else...I'd like to see at least one kid here, and it's going to take another 1200 acres of ground."

Both couples indicated optimism that they would overcome the hurdles of bringing in another farmer and his or her family. When imagining the future of their family's farm, these parents described scenarios which had their children or their grandchildren living on the land and running the family farm business. They not only aspired to having their children succeed them on the farm, but fully expected it to happen.

Discouraging Children from Farming

Five of the fourteen couples actively discouraged their children from farming. These couples differed from the first category in their attitudes towards farming. Generally, they were couples who had chosen not to take over the family farm and, instead, had chosen other occupations. Their occupations ranged from accounting to education to maintenance work. None of the husbands or wives in this category worked in agricultural occupations. Most had completed college. One couple indicated that they had attained the lifestyle they now enjoyed because of their college educations.

"Both Shawn and I went [to college], and our life is like this because we went to college and we want the same quality if not better for [our daughter]."

Great Plains Sociologist, Vol. 9 [1996], Iss. 1, Art. 2

Although at least one member of each couple was raised on the farm, many chose occupations which took them away from their home communities. They indicated that a different kind of lifestyle often drew them to towns or cities.

"I like the land but I don't feel that I'm indigenous, you know. I prefer to live in the city where it's convenient."

These couples gave many reasons for not taking over the family farm -- reasons which reflected not only their personal values but their attitudes towards farming in general. Many viewed the lack of financial feasibility as a disincentive to engage in farming.

"I'm convinced that farming is not worth signing up [for] today, like it probably was in the fifties when things were very good. And it's very easy to see that money put into some type of investment program is safer and [gets] more return, you know."

These nonfarming couples viewed the occupation of farming as being characterized by a high level of financial strain, frustration, and time commitment. Their comments implied dissatisfaction with the farm lifestyle.

". . . I grew up on the farm and I guess I don't want to be on the farm for a living."

The generally negative attitudes these couples held towards farming were reflected in their desire that their children not farm. They indicated that their aspirations for their children were to have a good quality of life, personal success, and happiness. They saw the financial insecurity and undesirable lifestyle of farming as strong reasons to discourage their children from farming.

"I've seen too much of the anguish by some of the

farmers. They're just having a hard time making ends meet and I don't want [my children] to go through that."

Some of the parents indicated that they did not see farming as a realistic career choice for their children. They mentioned the lack of opportunity for their children to gain on-farm experience and did not see farming as being feasible without the inheritance of land and capital. One family who had been farming but sold out expressed the view that although their children may have wanted to farm, they would not have the opportunity.

"... not at this point, since we're at where we're at -- sold things and sold land. I don't see how young people can get started without having a father in it, loaning equipment to them. I don't see how they could possibly do it."

Most parents in this group hoped and expected that their children would someday attend college. None of them expected their children to get an agriculture-related degree. Instead, they held aspirations that a college degree would lead to a professional occupation for their children.

"It goes without saying they both intend to [go to college]. I want them to do well in whatever they do. I want them to be happy. Their intentions are to be professionals. ... I doubt there will be any agriculture involved."

Unresolved about Children Farming

The six couples in this third category were uncertain as to whether or not their children would choose farming. While open to the possibility, they were not strongly encouraging their children to farm.

The couples in this category held attitudes towards farming that were in some ways like those in the first category and in other

ways like those in the second. Indeed, these couples seem to illustrate the tensions between the positive and negative aspects of farming as described by the first two categories of parents.

Couples in this category, like those who were encouraging their children to farm, were currently involved in the family farm, although in varying degrees. Some were owners and principal operators of the family's farm. Others considered themselves as "helping out" their parents on the farm, and did not live on the land. Some supplemented their farm incomes with other occupations in agriculture, education, or other part time work.

Based on farm size and couples' comments about the financial status of their farms, these farming couples did not appear to differ substantially from the farmers in the first category. However, since we did not measure families' socioeconomic status or ask them specifically about the financial status of their farms, we cannot be definitive in our judgement of "like" or "unlike" in this area.

Couples in this category appear to have made more conscious choices with respect to farming than had those in the first category. Many had left the farm for other careers, but had come back to the farm later. Several indicated they came back to the farm because of a preference for the work or lifestyle.

"I thought I would be a big city woman and have this exciting lifestyle away from the farm, but that wasn't me at all. So when I started looking for the next teaching job, I looked more rural."

Among the ideals frequently mentioned that pulled these couples into farming was the importance of family and place. We found this ideal to be consistent with couples who were encouraging their kids to farm. Several of the couples were farming to help out their parents or to keep the family place in operation. Many noted that their families were proud of the "history and heritage" of their family farms.

". . .it's been in our family since my great-grandfather. It's his grandfather's homestead. To see that go out of the family may be very, very difficult for my parents."

Haigh et al.; Intergenerational Continuity of the Family Farm; Influence of Par
In contrast with their positive views of their own lives on the farm, and more like the couples who discouraged their children from farming, these couples' attitudes about the future of family farming ranged from uncertain to pessimistic. Many indicated that their own farms were not profitable enough to support another family, or that debts must be paid off before they could consider passing the farm to the next generation. Almost all expressed doubts about what farming would be like for those in the future. They were concerned that factors beyond their personal control, such as agricultural prices and costs of production, would drive most family-sized farms out of business.

"I went to look at a pick-up, and the pick-up would cost me more than my farm did. This had escalated so much, and agriculture things have stayed the same. The price of corn is the same as it was in the early 50's. So I don't see it supporting anybody. The whole system, I think, is going to turn around where you're going to have one guy owning large portions of land and people like me work and farm, doing the farming."

Couples in this category feared that the trends in agriculture would lead to the eventual selling of the farm place to the highest bidder. They hoped to keep the farm in the family, but believed, as one man stated:

". . . it's probably just a pipe-dream. Eventually, somewhere down the line, it's going to pass on to somebody that's not in the family. I'm sure 110 years from now, it will be in some other family."

When stating goals for their children, these couples reflected their own tensions in their attitudes towards farming. Most indicated that they aspired to having at least one of their children take over the family farm, but that they were not encouraging or discouraging their children either way. Many said they expected the decision to farm would be up to their children.

"I'm not going to encourage him to farm and I'm not going to discourage him. You know, it's going to be up to him."

Parents in this category based their expectations on whether they saw their children as "farmers from day one" or not. They were concerned with how willing the child was to help out with chores and fieldwork, as well as with the child's stated goals for the future. Many of the parents stated that their farm-raised children did not like to help out on the farm and did not appear to be interested in farming.

"I'd like to give it all to the boys. . . But neither of the boys, at the present time, are interested in farming at all. The youngest one, right now, wishes he lived in town."

Some parents saw their children as being pulled between the farming tradition and other values. Many mentioned a tension between their child's interests in farming and interests in other, unrelated fields.

"My son had his goal set in the third grade that he was going to go to college and he was going to become a lawyer. I don't know if that's going to hold true, because he does like farming."

Parents sometimes indicated that their kids wanted to live in town, or wished for more money.

"Last year was a good year for farming, but the livestock wasn't too good, so we didn't have a real great year. I told her she would have to wait until we have a better year [to get a computer]. She made a comment to her mom that she should go out and get a real job and make some real money!"

Like all of the couples in our sample, couples in this category were planning on their children attending college, where they expected

children would study agriculture and, subsequently, work in an agriculture-related field, such as agri-business, rather than to come home and farm.

"Kris is looking at agri-business careers. Every now and then he pops back and talks about the space industry, but when he's talking serious, he's talking agri-business. Sometimes it's ag law, sometimes it's business. But, he also talks about having some beef."

None of the families expected their daughters to take over the family farm. Some assumed that girls would only farm if they married farmers.

"Allison... I can see her marrying a farmer. I can't see her farming herself, but I can see her marrying a farmer."

In general, these farming parents had unresolved visions as to what the future would bring for their farms. They held aspirations for their family's farm which did not always match their expectations of their children. While hoping that their farms would still be in the family twenty years from now, many predicted the farm would eventually pass out of the family.

"If one of them stays on the farm, we're going to do the best we can to help them out. If both of them go to the city, or whatever, I guess that will be the end of the farm here."

This study should be considered exploratory in nature. It is limited by the small sample size (28 individual interviews), which makes generalizations tentative.

With that caveat, our data do support the concept of linkages between parental experiences and parental aspirations and expectations for their children. These linkages can be seen in the comparison of the two most divergent categories of families -- couples that expect their children to be farmers versus the couples who discourage their children from farming.

The difference in experiences between these two groups appear to be rooted, in part, in their choices about taking over the family farm. Couples who are encouraging their children to farm had chosen farming themselves. In contrast, families who are discouraging their children from farming had chosen not to farm.

These two groups express divergent attitudes about the desirability of being a farmer. Couples who are encouraging their children to farm convey positive descriptions of their lives on farms, and express values in line with the choices they have made. For them, family is a crucial value and farming a very desirable life style. Families discouraging their children from farming describe the farming occupation and lifestyle as being much less desirable. They focus on the financial difficulties and frustrations of farming, and on the difficult future ahead for young farmers.

Parental attitudes towards farming in both instances seem to be mirrored by their aspirations for their children. Families encouraging their kids to farm desire it strongly enough that they are working hard to make farming a reality for their children. Families discouraging their kids from farming do not see it even as a viable choice for their kids. The life goals they have for their children lie completely outside of the realm of agriculture.

The experience of the third category of parents -- those unresolved about their children farming -- can be understood in the context of the two "extreme" cases described above. As stated earlier, they appear to illustrate the tensions between the positive and negative attitudes towards farming held by the first two categories of parents.

Couples unresolved about the possibility their children might

farm appear to be very much like couples encouraging their children to farm in terms of farming experience and socioeconomic status. They differed in that many had experienced careers other than farming and then had returned to the farm.

Couples unresolved about their children farming also seem to have a different attitude about the future than do those encouraging their children. The former are more pessimistic and contradictory. They envision a relatively negative future for farming, even while describing their own positive experiences as farmers. They admit that they may be financially unable to keep the farm in the family, even while stressing the importance of family heritage and property. Further, they reveal a tension between their own commitment to family or a piece of land, and their commitment to giving their children the freedom to choose what they want to do with their lives.

In struggling with conflicts of personal experience and attitudes about the future of farming, these unresolved parents recognize the struggle their growing children face. In this context, parents are less likely to strongly encourage or discourage their children about being farmers. They are more likely to stress that their child must make the ultimate decision about their careers. They are also unlikely to invest effort into bringing the child into farming until their child demonstrates strong interest and ability in farming. All of these factors may decrease the likelihood that their children will succeed them on the farm.

Conclusion

The results of this study open many additional questions as to how the changing experiences and attitudes of farmers affects the intergenerational transfer of the family farm. A farming family's vision of the future of family agriculture appears to be an important predictor of the aspirations a mother or father will have for his or her children in regards to farming.

What factors contribute to that vision of the future? Optimism versus pessimism about the future may be a result of federal farm policy, weather trends, neighbor's and personal experiences, political

views, or numerous other factors. Clearly, this vision is an important factor affecting the selection of farming as an occupation. Further research is needed to investigate this aspect of intergenerational farm transitions. Specifically, research is needed to determine how parents develop their vision of the farming life, how that vision is transmitted to the children, and how that vision affects the career choice of the children.