The Landscape

Amidst the world’s sixth mass extinction event, it has been argued that “extinction” refers not only to biodiversity, but also to farmers and traditional “agri-culture”. Environmental, social and economic concerns surrounding contemporary agriculture and the so-called “productivist” systems, which contaminate natural resources, negatively impact human health and cause soil erosion. The radical agricultural evolution is expected by the end of the decade, though many farms are bankrupted by this transition.

Accordingly, academia, practice and this research question: Who will the farmer of a more sustainable future be?

Potential Solutions

New schemes grant farmers public money for prioritising land stewardship over food production. To adapt to new funding models, farmers are investigating more environmentally-focused approaches, new revenue streams and expansion opportunities.

Regenerative Agriculture (RA)

As a prominent alternative to industrial-productivist agriculture, RA unites agroecology with sustainable intensification – two recurring concepts in the debate on the future of agricultural practice. While RA has no formal definition, it is based on five sustainability grounded pillars, which offer existing farmers options for gradual transition with immediate environmental and economic benefits.

Research Focus

To investigate “the farmer of the future”, this research focuses on farmers of forward-looking practice, as these farmers are most likely to exist in the future. Finding support from opposite poles of the agricultural debate, farmers in RA provide for an inclusive and specific segment of sustainable farming, which may most comprehensively inform the future of farming (and farmers).

Methodology

A literature review revealed that identity-based research in agriculture is predominantly quantitative or mixed-method, conducted over short time spans and offers only limited insight on larger processes affecting the farmer, beyond behavioural correlations.

Thus, this study proposes a 6 month ethnography of two farms, which will be selected on the basis that they participate in RA. While the farmer’s community will be studied as a whole, the primary subject is the “farmer” (as a means of contextualising the research). The farmer will be selected according to their role: any person consuming RA products or services, who is involved in the farm’s production.

Combining big and small story narratives from a social constructivist perspective will demonstrate the connections and relationship between individuals’ (self) narratives, resources within the farm setting (organisation/family) and society (immediate community). While the big story approach will result from semi-structured interviews and the researcher’s participant observation, small stories will emerge from “second wave” narrative analysis, which considers the ethnographic context.

Research Impact

Giving farmers better representation in politics, academia and public image

Better understanding of the (future) farmer and their impact on the environment will:

- Provide regulators with nuanced insights into the challenges policy changes carry
- Address socially-charged discourse on sustainability issues
- Offer strategic value to those who promote it – including civil society, NGOs, and major food multi-national companies

With better understanding, further contributions can be made to improving farmer wellbeing and encouraging developments toward environmental and business sustainability.

Identity as a Theoretical Lens

When operationalised, the “sense of self” becomes the self-concept, which constitutes much of identity-based theory.

In seeking answers to “Who am I?” and “Who are We?”, individuals formulate a self-narrative that draws on memories, desires and cultural resources. These reproduce the sense of self, and even transform it in times of uncertainty, as for example in this phase of agricultural transition. Therefore, self-concept and (social) identity theory have provided for academic discussion on the future farmer. This process is considered identity work – where actions as well as subscription to values, norms, beliefs and definitions are crucial elements to identity construction and regulation, which are inherently interactive.

From a narrative approach, identity work is a process of interactive storytelling: a combination of i) writing one’s own narrative, ii) of being written by others and iii) of seeking to exist within the stories of others. Identifying the future farmer thus requires a wide lens that includes the cultural, spheres of influence – those who are contributing to the story being written.

Research Question

To account for the complex dynamics that construct the future farmer identity, the research question becomes:

What role do relationships play in the identity construction of regenerative farmers?