

Rejoinder

“Dumb Farmers”: Or, they can’t possibly know what they’re talking about — we’re the experts

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Over the past decade, we, as a research team, have explicitly investigated the intersection between small family farms, economics, development, and culture in northwest Ohio (Gatrell, Reid, & Ross, 2011; Gatrell, Reid, Steiger, Smith, & Carroll, 2009; Gatrell, Thakur, Reid, & Smith, 2010; LaFary, Gatrell, Reid, & Lindquist, 2006; Reid, Gatrell, & Ross, 2012; Reid, Smith, Gatrell, & Carroll, 2009; Reid, Smith, Haase, Ross, Mirozoyants, & Gatrell, 2009). As such, our primary interest has been in describing and understanding the socio-spatial and cultural context of small family farms and their production practices, as well as business practices as observed in the study area with the assistance of

congressionally directed spending. To that end, *Cultivating Narratives: Cultivating Successors* (Steiger, Eckert, Reid, & Ross, 2012) focused on the practices and decision making of farms (to be read as firms) and the empirically observed realities of northwest Ohio farmers, and articulated the overall positionality of the research relative to the cultural and political significance of the family farm.

The purpose of this essay is to respond to the observations of Chiswell. From the outset, we recognize that the more applied nature of our work is inherently less critical than more conceptual accounts. On this point, we agree with Chiswell and make no apologies. Unfortunately, the commentary focused primarily on three general observations concerning sustainability, nutrition (as well as food security, more broadly), and demographics (specifically likely successors). Yet, the focus of the paper does not conceptually pivot — intentionally or unintentionally — on the proposed tripartite. Rather, the three themes simply frame the broader value of family farms within the context of policy

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discussions and familiar popular accounts. Indeed, the broader research team has intentionally avoided specific discussions of sustainability per se. When and where we have addressed the issue of sustainability, we have considered the overall sustainability of the family farm as a structure, openly questioned the sustainability of these structures, articulated the shifting nature of the small family farm, and/or obliquely referenced more generic understandings of sustainability relative to local food systems. Likewise, the issue of nutrition is a general reference to recognized meta-narratives of local food systems. On the points of “sustainability” and “food security,” Chiswell’s more nuanced and conceptual accounting is much appreciated.

On the issue of demographics, the response does not address this issue directly other than to critique the succession literature as deployed by the authors. Despite the critique of the literature review, succession in the case of northwest Ohio and the drivers of economic change in the region (i.e., urbanization, global competition, shifting market structures, and capital intensity) as articulated in the oral histories and prior works are equally compelling and nuanced insofar as their individual and collective narratives demonstrate the complexities of succession (a point Chiswell does not dispute) and the realities of succession on the ground. While it is certainly “paramount that future research strives to make an accurate and well supported case for the family farm, appreciates the uniqueness of the pressures influencing the succession process at this time, and engages with and builds on foregoing literature” (Chiswell, p. 3), the Chiswell response is considerably more concerned with the literature than the lived experiences of farmers and the values driven nature of the family farms. For instance, Chiswell’s citation of the differences between “small” and “large” farms enrolled in a government program is instructive. In the United States context (which likely differs from the experience of Europeans), such programs typically favor large farms over small and such enrollment reflects nothing more than the bias in the focus of the government program. Also, we have found these small family farmers to be rather suspicious of government programs in general. Chiswell apparently doesn’t think it necessary to

query the farmers as to why they enroll in the program but simply imputes motive. This is the very opposite of what is involved with oral histories.

In the end, we do not dispute Chiswell’s critique. It’s just not a fair critique of the oral histories presented or the experience of the farmers. To that end, the paper’s objective was to share the experience of farmers and to understand the current issues facing farmers — such as point-of-sale marketing structures, big-box chain stores, more global economic structures, and so on, many of which have emerged since they were initially explicated in the literature in the 1990s (see Gasson & Errington, 1993). While academics privilege the literature, the reality is that narratives are just stories — and these stories of northwest Ohio farmers have the potential to make meaning on the ground of high concepts. Insofar as our work may or may not replicate the findings of prior qualitative studies, we — as academics — earnestly believe that practitioners, policy makers, and our colleagues can learn a great deal from the practices, values, and re-telling of personal histories of self-described “dumb farmers” (Gatrell et al., 2009, p. 352). To that end, *Cultivating Narratives* is useful for understanding succession as a process — not as an outcome (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 13) — that is embedded within not only the socio-cultural context of the “family farm,” but also as a unique geography and symbolic politics that are both empirically and conceptually relevant. 

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