Ferguson, Jackson. Women on the Farm in Western New York

Research Proposal

My research video will explore the role of gender on a farm in Western New York. The primary goal of this project will be to examine and demonstrate the experience of a woman on a farm, as American tradition sees farming as a historically male-dominated activity. I will conduct research on-site with one or more female farmers; I aim to employ more of a participant-observation style of filmmaking as opposed to an interview style whenever possible, as I anticipate my subjects altering their behavior in direct correlation to the obtrusiveness of my filming technique (the more obvious it is that I am an interviewer and they are a subject, the more they will change their behavior) (Heider 1976). In addition to working with female farmers in person, I will use supplementary information from other sources: male farmers, female farmers with whom I cannot meet in person/extendively work with, and any other experienced informants. While this supplemental information is not as imperative, I seek to contextualize the information gathered from the primary subjects (the female farmers).

The literature on gender and farming suggests that the tide is changing in favor of farmland gender equality in the U.S. — one study noted that interviews with American farmers suggested “detradiationalization and diversity” on the family farm (Beach 2013). Thus, I expect to find evidence of respect for women on the farm. However, I also anticipate discovering distinct challenges that female farmers face as a result of their sex.

This is a good start and an interesting topic. The literature should direct you to specific research question

Proposal is about 250 words: yes

Proposal outlines the goals of the project: strong
good adequate needs work

Proposal outlines the methods of the project: strong
good adequate needs work

Reference to course readings: strong
good adequate needs work

Reference to scholarly/peer-reviewed anthropological works: strong
good adequate needs work

Final Video

Scholarly Background

Farming, from a historical perspective, is an activity that both men and women have participated in (and is, in that way, ungendered). Any cultural anthropology class will discuss the differentiation of food procurement roles on the basis of gender, whether talking about horticultural societies or hunter-gatherer nomads that work the land to produce food (Judson 2019). This is such an easy point to research/reference that it looks lazy to cite a classroom lecture. It is also not appropriate in a formal research assignment.

Farming in industrialized societies can be characterized as being dominated by technology in an attempt to increase efficiency. Rachel Ann Rosenfeld (1985: 5-4), a sociologist, suggests that this shift resulted in an increased gender divide on farms: “In agrarian societies based on the use of the plow, fertilizer, irrigation, and draft animals, men took on the dominant roles in agriculture.” (1985: 4) As farming became more technologically advanced, it seems the trend was a decreased role of women in the field. Black et al. (2019:108) try to explain this phenomenon by pointing out that in Western society “men are viewed as having a natural affinity with technology, whereas women supposedly fear or dislike it.” (2019:108) In any case, the trend heading into the 19th and 20th centuries was one of women being pushed out of a historically significant role as agricultural producers.

Another catalyst of female role-change on the farm was the partner of industrialization — capitalism. In her study of southern Illinois farm women, Jane Adams noted that the shift of farming and other disciplines to the bases for economic processes, supplanting artisanal and agrarian production...[divided work from recreation and public from private space.” (Adams 1993: 90) keep the author and the date etc together one way or another This separation of home and work was a key development in shaping gendered farm roles in modern American agriculture. Babbitt’s (1993) report on the clash of farm women and extension home economists what are they? in New York State gives some perspective on a shifting idea of gender as it relates to farming (and the workplace in general). Young, urbanized, female home economists I'm not sure what you mean by a "home economist" here thought farm women needed to modernize and so they told the typically older farm women that they needed to separate their home from their workplace in order to increase efficiency, the idea being a woman should stay home to ensure the growth of healthy children that could help out on the farm. I got lost in this long, confusing sentence and I'm not sure what you meant to say. (Babbitt 1993: 86-98) period goes here Needless to say, urbanites (and therefore decision-makers in this increasingly industrialized society) did not believe (when? I'm not sure what era you're discussing) in a woman's ownability what is ownability? to directly produce on a farm; she only contribute by rearing healthy children that could be direct producers (if male, presumably) or create more producers (if female). This was no secret and “New York’s Extension Service in Home Economics rarely acknowledged that farm women participated in production or marketing.” (Babbitt 1993: 100). You didn't contextualize this study enough to make this section clear.
It seems that this initial push to “modernize” farm women by getting them out of the field and into the home was initially successful. The United States Census of Agriculture in New York did not even start publishing data on the number of female producers in farming until their volume in 1978, which reported the total number of female producers in New York at 2,916 compared to 46,316 male producers. (USDC 1978) This change in reporting was likely a result of success in the women’s rights movement of the 1960s and ’70s. But it cannot be assumed that women simply dropped out of farming with the advent of the “modern woman.” Indeed, in Adams' study of southern Illinois farm women she found that even though farm women “accepted many aspects of the doctrine of separate spheres and the disciplines of ‘modernity’ in the post-World War II period, they tended to retain their identity as producers, as earners of income.” (1985; 90) A more recent study of northeastern female farmers builds on this in its discussion of farming women’s roles; though 54.1% of respondents said the role of “farm wife/ domestic partner” (a role more closely aligned with the home economics view from the mid-1900s) fully describes them, 49.9% said the role of “farmer-operator” (a hands-on producer on the farm, in one way or another) fully describes them. (Brasier et al. 2014; 297) Women have continued to work on the farm in a productive role and, in fact, the most recent census reports 21,880 female producers and 35,985 male producers. (USDA 2017)

For my film, I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible. (Ruby 2000) Although the most logistically feasible method for collecting information was an interview (one participant was recalling time on a distant farm and the other did not want me filming her farm), I tried to ask few questions (as my questions would unavoidably place my own expectations upon the participant) and leave them open ended. The thinking behind this was to let the participants talk about what they wanted to talk about and therefore present themselves as they wanted to. I included a clip of me discussing this in an attempt at explicit reflexivity. (Heider 1976) This two-part format of an explanation by the filmmaker and a depiction of the events described is reminiscent of the structure of The Axe Fight by Tim Asch and Napoleon Chagnon.

Maddy Bowen, who worked on a farm in Maine, understood that some see female farmers as unique; I think you mean unusual. However, she and the women she worked with did not feel there were any predetermined farm role based on gender. Sandy Kramer, who works on a farm owned by her husband, did discuss gender-based differentiation on her cow farm, but her role was still very much on the farm (as opposed to in the house). It is of importance to note that Sandy’s husband made it very clear that he was still in charge of everything though Sandy took leadership in certain tasks; Sandy agreed. Neither Bowen nor Kramer suggested that there was anything novel about women in farming.

References Cited

Adams, Jane


Babbitt, Kathleen R.


Beach, Sarah S.

2013 “Tractorettes” or Partners? Farmers’ Views on Women in Kansas Farming Households. Rural Sociology 78:210-228.

Black, Kirsten, et al.


Brasier, Kathryn J., et al.


Heider, K.

1976 Ethnographic Film. University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas.

Judkins, Russell.

Rosenfeld, Rachel Ann.


Ruby, J.


United States Department of Agriculture


U.S. Department of Commerce


Approximately 900 words

Yes  no

Provides basic background information for the issues

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Substantial list of scholarly and peer-reviewed References Cited listed

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Includes brief discussion of why you chose the format of your video (e.g., narrated or non-narrated, etc) in relation to the course readings.

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Makes reference to any of the films we watched that inspired your approach to the film. If so, why?

Yes  no

The final wiki space is in past tense

Yes  no

References in American Antiquity format.

Yes  no  some problems

Writing style

Outstanding  Strong  Good  Adequate  Weak

Reflection on the Final Video
My original proposal noted that I expected “to find evidence of respect for women on the farm” but also to discover “distinct challenges that female farmers face as a result of their sex.” One of my reasons for these expectations was Beach’s (2013: page number) observation of “detraditionalization and diversity” on the American family farm (Beach 2013). I certainly found evidence of respect for women on the farm, as in both cases I looked at the women were working in the field (not in the house). Furthermore, the women I spoke to played important roles on the farm. As for the so-called recent trend of detraditionalization, however, I am not convinced. I did not observe any indication that what these farm women do is in any way a revolution against the norm. Both farms discussed have a history of many generations of female farmers good point. That said, one of my participants even explicitly noted that in the United States farming is viewed as a male profession. My studies have made me wonder whether or not the view of farming as a male activity is simply a result of outsiders incorrectly analyzing farmers with the use of their own standards and expectations good. I have realized, too, that broad generalizations on topics as broad as this one (especially without a much bigger sample) are unproductive at best and harmful at worst.

I was forced, in both cases, to use an interview style for the film. My intention with one of the women had been to film her work routine on the farm which would have given the audience a more tangible grasp of her role on the farm; unfortunately, she did not let me film her farm operations. The interview style was productive, though, and I was especially pleased with how the discussion with Maddy Bowen turned out. I chose to not include any narration and let the participants talk freely (although this would not be obvious to the audience as there are many edited cuts and splices in my final product) and I think this allowed for an honest look at the two women featured (Ruby 2000). The only real downfall of the interviews was that the second of the two was difficult to hear, as the participant wanted to talk in her office (which was surrounded by loud machinery.

It does not make sense to compare the video to the written component because the two were always meant to be presented together (Heider 1976). Both are incomplete without the other — the video is unsatisfying without the reflection and the reflection is not tethered to reality without the video.

References Cited
(refer to above section)

Written Reflection on Final Video Rubric (see syllabus p 3-4)

Evaluates your video in relation to your written wiki space and the course readings, with explicit references to both.

Outstanding Strong Adequate Weak

Discusses choices you made about the style of the video and evaluates how successful were they in conveying the subject matter.

Outstanding Strong Adequate Weak

Discusses how well the video worked in comparison to the written component?

Outstanding Strong Adequate Weak

Explicitly reference the course readings (and other resources if you wish).

Outstanding Strong Adequate Weak

Entry is in past tense.

Yes No