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Where value creation meets appreciation and care: motives of farmers for direct marketing in Brandenburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the number of agricultural enterprises engaged in various forms of direct marketing has increased, both internationally and in Germany. To date, however, little is known about the farmers' motives for selling their products directly to consumers. This knowledge gap seems particularly striking in light of the sociopolitical objective of fostering this mode of marketing and distribution. Given the hegemonic conceptualization of the farmer as a rational choice entrepreneur, the reasons for this could be purely economic, or a response to a seemingly growing demand for local produce. Nonetheless, the little research that exists on farmers' motivations also points in other directions and emphasizes the importance of relationality and socioecological embeddedness, which are central characteristics of care. This article thus explores how logics of care provide a starting point for farmers' motivation to direct marketing. Through the analysis of nine qualitative interviews with farmers in Brandenburg, Germany, who sell some or all of their products directly, it illustrates how they consider themselves within a structure of multifaceted responsibilities. The results further indicate that direct marketing seems to be a logical consequence of these responsibilities. By providing a more nuanced picture, the direct selling of produce can be seen as both a strategy for value creation and a means of appreciation and a set of practices of care toward the complex web of human and non-human beings contributing to agricultural production.

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Introduction

As this article is being written (early 2024), the political protests by farmers in Germany are coming to a head. Triggered by the announcement that agricultural diesel subsidies would be cut, large protests took place across the country in the first weeks of January. However, the discontent seems to go beyond the removal of subsidies (Huber 2024). In response to the protests, Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck has proposed – among other suggestions – the strengthening of direct marketing (BMWK 2024). Also at Berlin's International Green Week 2024, the biggest annual trade fair for German agriculture, horticulture, and other food industries, direct marketing is prominent: The Future Forum for Rural Development, organized by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, focuses on the question of regionalized and short value chains within food and energy production.

But even before this current spotlight, agricultural direct marketing has long had a place among the sociopolitical approaches for creating a more sustainable human-nature relationship. Strengthening regionalized and shorter value chains is one sub-aspect of a diverse range of political initiatives and concepts like the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP 2015), the German *Zukunftskommission Landwirtschaft* (ZKL 2021) (a committee of agricultural stakeholders), or the German National Bioeconomy Strategy (BMBF and BMEL 2020, 42). Yet despite growing interest in the direct marketing of agricultural products, little is known about what actually motivates farmers to take this route when bringing their produce to the market – even though knowing the perspectives of those who have already adopted direct marketing could certainly be helpful when discussing further steps.

What are the motives behind this decision? Is it, as is often assumed, a purely rational and economic choice and thus a market-oriented motivation? The little research that exists on farmers' motivations

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also points in other directions and emphasizes the importance of relationality and socioecological embeddedness, which are central characteristics of care. Consequently, this article explores how aspects of care provide a starting point for motivation to direct marketing: What are the specific dimensions to which these aspects are related?

To answer these questions, I first give a broad overview of the existing literature on direct marketing. Focusing on farmers' motivations, I show that this area has been empirically understudied and that the few existing findings point to aspects that are ultimately central features of care. In the next step, I briefly discuss theories of care in order to embed them explicitly in an agroecological context as well as in the context of my research. After these initial theoretical considerations, I present the design of my empirical work, consisting of qualitative interviews with farmers in Brandenburg who sell part or all of their products directly. The presentation of my analysis, and thus the empirical results, takes place in two steps: First, I trace the convictions of the farmers based on *areas of responsibility* identified in the interviews. These commitments, in turn, form the basis for the decision to engage in direct marketing – a relationship that I explore in the second part of the analysis as well as the link between value creation and appreciation. Finally, I return to the research question by discussing the findings and explaining why direct marketing can be understood not only as a form of value creation, but also as a practice of care. In the conclusion, I provide an outlook for further research.

Bringing produce to the market: direct marketing

The direct marketing of agricultural produce and foodstuffs through short and/or alternative value chains has gained increasing attention in recent years (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003; Born and Purcell 2006; Macias 2008; Goodman, Dupuis, and Goodman 2012; Corvo and Matacena 2018). Beyond the sociopolitical space, this can be seen in the empirical reemergence of these value chains and networks as well as in scholarly attention. According to the results of the 2020 agricultural census in Germany, 18% of agricultural enterprises process and sell produce through direct marketing (DESTATIS 2024a); the final report of the ZKL (2021) even mentions up to 42%. Particularly through digitalization, the opportunities for farmers to market their products directly to consumers seem to be growing, and in addition to the established farmers' markets or direct farm sales, farmers can now reach potential consumers through a variety of analogue and digital channels. These various methods of marketing are finding their way into academic debate and are being studied and discussed from different perspectives, with a focus on changing structures and their influence on the food system (Macias 2008; Corvo and Matacena 2018) or on food-related practices (Čajić, Brückner, and Brettin 2022; Samsioe and Fuentes 2022). Nevertheless, the notion of locality and localism, and its ability to counter current trends in globalized food systems, is critically discussed as it is far from a neutral concept without tensions or intricate inequalities (Born and Purcell 2006; Cohen 2016; DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison 2006).

What becomes apparent when reviewing the existing literature, however, is the under-consideration of the perspectives and practices of one of the main protagonists – the agricultural producers. Looking at the production side of direct marketing, the topics include, for example, a critical discussion of the role for sustainability (Brown and Guiffrida 2014) or rural development (Renting, Marsden, and Banks 2003) as well as different marketing structures (Paciarotti and Torregiani 2021). Less considered are the farmers' practices, motivations, or challenges and it can be argued that the agricultural production side is often underrepresented, especially in a qualitative perspective.

One can only guess at the reasons for this general lack of consideration. Naomi Beingessner and Ember Fletcher (2020) point out that this may be due to the focus on value chains, which so far are defined purely in terms of the market economy; farmers may simply be responding to increasing demand for regional, directly marketed products. A historical analysis by Shane Hamilton supports this claim and he traces the development of agricultural management as a discipline and demonstrates how in the early twentieth century and "for a surprisingly long period, proponents of farm management emphasized not a disciplinary body of knowledge but instead very pragmatic, socially embedded ways of being a farmer" (Hamilton 2024, 8). But this embedded and embodied understanding gradually shifted and "[i]n theorizing farm management as a constellation of decisions, economists from the 1960s onward imagined farmers as *Homo economicus* [emphasis in original], capable of making rational decisions if given all the relevant information" (Hamilton 2024, 11). This simplistic conceptualization of farmers has found its way into policy design (Brown and Guiffrida 2021) and discussions on agricultural value creation suggest that direct marketing, or even the integration of aspects of sustainability, are based on

strategic considerations for value-added agriculture (Buller and Morris 2004; Lu and Dudensing 2015). However, as early as the 1960s and 1970s the trope of the purely economic farmer came under scrutiny (Wolpert 1964; Gasson 1973) and various academics highlight, for example, the role of values (Busck 2002) or culture and identity (Burton et al. 2021) in farmers' decision making.

In line with these voices, the studies that do shed light on farmers' perspectives on direct marketing also suggest additional motivating factors beyond purely economic considerations. Beingessner and Fletcher (2020), who conducted interviews and group discussions with Canadian farmers, go in a similar direction. They state that "[f]armers are not merely reacting to consumer trends when they produce local or more sustainable food; indeed, many engage in sustainable practices because of their own values, indicating a deeper and more lasting commitment to the principles of local and alternative food systems than to the vagaries of market forces" (Beingessner and Fletcher 2020, 139). Their research indicates that the farmers' motives for selling their products directly relate to sustainability, relationality, and solidarity. In a case study in northern Italy, Eugenio Demartini, Anna Gaviglio, and Alberto Pirani (2017) conclude that while economic aspects help to motivate the marketing of products through short value chains, the results also suggest that a direct relationship with consumers should also be considered a crucial factor. Amy Trauger and her colleagues analyzed the perspectives of female farmers on alternative value chains in Pennsylvania and found that for them, successful farming was characterized by "care, responsibility to the public, and connection to the farm" (Trauger et al. 2010, 53). In this context, the direct marketing of products is born out of the opportunity to respond to and take care of the social or cultural needs of the community. The local community also plays a decisive role for farmers' motivation to participate in a community-supported agriculture (CSA) scheme in a study by a team led by Rosie Cox. They found that providing organic food to local people, reducing food miles and sharing knowledge through direct communication were key inspirational factors (Cox et al. 2008).

These existing studies on the perspectives and motivations of farmers who market their produce directly repeatedly reveal that relationality, socioecological embeddedness, and responsibility are driving impulses. As a researcher with a background in feminist theory, these aspects sound quite familiar, as these are defining characteristics for care, care work, and socioecological reproduction. These findings thus point to a tension that has been highlighted by feminist economic theorists for decades: the separation of production and reproduction within the hegemonic understanding of economy and in this case agriculture. Contrary to this separation, aspects central to care and reproduction seem to play a role in the field of agricultural production and in decisions regarding agricultural value creation. In the next step, therefore, I provide a brief overview on care theories, especially in connection with agriculture, and develop my research questions.

Care and agriculture

In recent years, some research has emerged that uses a care perspective as an analytical entry point for agricultural contexts. One of the best-known examples might be the work of María Puig de la Bellacasa (2015) on human-soil relationships. By tracing different soil ontologies and timescapes, she demonstrates how these conceptualizations inform practices and knowledges of soil care. Sophie Chao (2018, 434) focuses in her research on seeds and states that "[s]eed economies in the palm oil sector are also 'economies of care.'" She turns her attention to different affective attachments and the resulting tension between loving and violent practices of care in this context. The reference to tensions and simultaneities of control and care are also a key result of Barbara Wittmann's (2022) study of Bavarian farmers engaged in intensive animal husbandry. What unites these perspectives is critical reflection on the paradigm of productivism prevalent in the hegemonic understanding of agriculture and its effects on the different agricultural practices of care. Beyond these examples, other authors also have located care practices in different farming systems such as, for example, regenerative agriculture (Seymour and Connelly 2023), vine growing (Krzywoszynska 2016), and food self-provisioning (Pungas 2020).

What this brief overview reveals is that care in general is a challenging concept to grasp since it refers to heterogeneous practices, activities, and contexts. Nonetheless, feminist scholars highlight the socioeconomic importance of care work as a prerequisite for (social, political, and economic) life in general (Waring 1990). In a very broad definition, Joan Tronto (1994, 103) describes care as a set of activities that "maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible." She further speaks of a "complex, life-sustaining web" (Tronto 1994, 103) in which both humans and the environment are interwoven, not least through these practices and activities. Following Puig de la Bellacasa (2015), care can be understood as both a perspective

and a set of practices directed toward the well-being of human and non-human beings. Two key characteristics of care are highlighted by both authors: care enfolds in relations and involves a normative orientation toward well-being. However, as care practices are both shaped by and imbued with power structures, the layout of particular care relationships and the orientation toward who's well-being is highly contested (Sevenhuijsen 2003; Puig de la Bellacasa 2015; Hofmeister et al. 2019).

There are numerous scholars who discuss the ethical and political values and norms of care and the extent to which these can and should have an impact on general societal discourses and structures such as politics and the economy (Sevenhuijsen 2003; Bauhardt and Çağlar 2010; Tronto 2015). But what makes the discussion of care so interesting in the context of agriculture? Why should care be linked to environmental, sociopolitical, or even economic contexts? Scholars from the fields of feminist economics and feminist political ecology have been answering this question for years by repeatedly showing how the hegemonic notion of autonomous, purely rational decision-making subjects – to which the key characteristics of care stand in fundamental contrast – leads to a destructive societal relationship with nature and the environment (Bauhardt 2013; MacGregor and Mäki 2023) from which we now have to deal with the crisis-laden outcome. Focusing on a care perspective therefore implies a radical rethinking and entails profound changes in politics and economics, as well as how socioecological resources are dealt with, for example in the context of agriculture. Accepting multi-species entanglements, and thus starting from a perspective of continuing, maintaining, and repairing for the well-being of both human and non-human life, could trigger a rethinking of agriculture in a more sustainable way. Nevertheless, in line with the hegemonic conceptualization of economy, agriculture is commonly negotiated under the parameters of efficiency increase and profit maximization. Relationality, a normative orientation toward well-being and affective aspects, finds little place in it, even though these factors matter. If we take the previous findings on farmers' motivations for direct marketing seriously, the following question arises: How do aspects of care provide a starting point for the motivation for direct marketing? What are the specific dimensions to which these aspects are related?

Methodology and empirical context

The methodological approach of this article is strongly influenced by feminist standpoint theory (Harding 1986) since the focus of my analysis will be the view and perspectives of the participating farmers – how they construct their motivations and reasons for direct marketing. In doing so, I try to follow Donna Haraway's (1988, 850) call for "the ability partially to translate knowledges among different – and power-differentiated – communities" in order to broaden conversations about agricultural production beyond the dominant notion in agricultural science of the purely economic farmer. The qualitative research and analysis of this article should be understood as an exploration – a tentative, though systematic, search or a partial perspective (Haraway 1988) – and accordingly makes no claim to be a comprehensive study of farmers' motivations. Rather, the aim of this article is to provide initial impulses and to point to directions in the search for a better understanding of the role of care within agricultural production and especially value creation.

To obtain these perspectives and knowledges, I conducted qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with farmers in Brandenburg between Spring 2021 and Winter 2022. The federal state of Brandenburg, Germany's fifth largest state and one of the least populated, uses almost 44% of its land for agriculture, with an average farm size of 242 hectares (598 acres) which is well above the German average of 65 hectares (161 acres) (DESTATIS 2024b). In 2020, out of the 5,420 agricultural enterprises, 550 were involved in the processing and direct marketing of agricultural products (DESTATIS 2021). In 2023, only 5,370 enterprises are listed, but at the time of writing data on direct marketing were not yet available. The interviews were preceded by a brief desk study to compile a list of farms that sell their products through various forms of direct marketing, such as CSAs, *Marktschwärmer*,[1] regional box schemes,[2] or farmers' markets or farm shops. In composing my sample, I aimed for the greatest possible diversity in the forms of direct marketing. During the course of the interviews, however, it became apparent that most farmers usually operate a network of multiple forms of direct marketing. Another aspect of the agricultural reality of these farmers, which was ultimately reflected in the interviews as well, became apparent in the initial responses to the interview request: the farmers' high workloads. As one put it in his refusal to participate in the project: "Farmer's time is like gold dust." Table 1 gives an overview of the respondents and their agricultural production and direct marketing practices.

The recorded interviews – almost all of them were held on farm with the exception of one interview via videoconference – were fully transcribed for further analysis. A qualitative coding frame was generated by a mixture of deductive and inductive

Table 1. Overview of respondents.

Name[a]	Types of agricultural production	Forms of direct marketing
Alexandra (Founder, owner, and farmer)	Livestock farming for meat (3,000 geese), arable farming (54 ha), grassland (16 ha)	Farm shop, Internet, local restaurants
Andrea (Founder, owner, and farmer)	Livestock farming for dairy products (180 cows, 40 milked),[b] grassland (250 ha)	Food cooperatives, *Marktschwärmer*
Annika (Founder, owner, and farmer)	Vegetable farming (3 ha)	CSA, *Marktschwärmer*
Carsten (Main shareholder and farmer)	Mainly livestock farming (cattle and hogs), arable farming (over 150 ha)	Farm shop, *Marktschwärmer*, local restaurant, two local shops, direct sale to local branch of supermarket chain
Constanze (Funder, owner and farmer)	Vegetable and arable farming (12 ha)	*Marktschwärmer*
Jana (Founder and board member of the co-operative; partly farming)	Fruit and vegetable farming (30 ha)	CSA
Klara (Employee in her parent's company; partly farming)	Livestock farming for meat (cattle, hogs, and sheep), arable farming (600 ha fodder and biogas), grassland (200 ha)	Farm shop, farmer's markets, local restaurants, direct sale to local branch of supermarket chain
Moritz (Owner by means of family takeover and farmer)	Vegetable and arable farming (10 ha)	Farmer's markets, CSA, regional box scheme
Stephan (Founder, owner, and farmer)	Fruit growing (30 ha)	CSA

[a]The names of the interviewees have been changed to preserve anonymity. The author obtained the informed, voluntary consent of the participants in writing before the interview. [b]Unfortunately, about a year and a half after our interview, Andrea had to close the dairy and switch to all-mother calf rearing; she now sells pasture-raised beef.

coding; accordingly, the categories and codes were mostly derived from the empirical material itself and partly from care-theory considerations (Schreier 2014). The coding frame was evaluated with the support of a colleague[3] and modified accordingly prior to the main phase of coding. This frame, the basis of my systematic analysis, consists of nine categories (sociodemographic information, farming business, direct marketing, relationality and relationships [deductive category], responsibility, emotions [deductive category], working conditions, business efficiency and challenges) with two to four codes (e.g., within direct marketing: development, structure, advantages, and disadvantages; within business efficiency: general business efficiency, profitability, and care). The results of the coding frame "serve[d] as a starting point for further data exploration, examining results of qualitative content analysis for patterns and co-occurrences of selected categories" (Schreier 2014, 180). Thus, a further step of abstraction in the process of analysis was reached by developing thematic networks (Attride-Stirling 2001) out of selected categories and codes that related to the research question of this article. These thematic networks served as the basis for the analysis, which I present in the following section.

Results

> I always say that we never set up the farm store to make the biggest turnover of our lives. The farm store is the window of our business, simply the stage where we can communicate our concept and our convictions. (Klara)[4]

What Klara expresses very clearly is something I was able to find in almost all of the interviews, albeit in different shades: The motivation for direct marketing can be better understood against the background of the farmers' convictions, as it is inextricably linked to them. Therefore, in the following analysis, I first trace the respective convictions and then establish the connection between these topics and the farmers' motivation for direct marketing. The discussion of my findings will follow in the next section.

Forms and dimensions of responsibility – tracing the convictions of farmers

Talking with the farmers in this sample about their motivations for farming and direct marketing – about what keeps them in the farming business and on track with direct marketing despite different obstacles – all of the interviewees related their answers to different sets of beliefs and convictions, which, as I demonstrate in this section, almost always lead to issues of responsibility. Following my analysis, I argue that these farmers consider themselves part of a diverse network of responsibilities, which relates to and touches different areas in their socioecological embeddedness. Giving an overview of these responsibilities, Figure 1 puts the different aspects that were raised by the nine farmers into a thematic network that will also serve as an

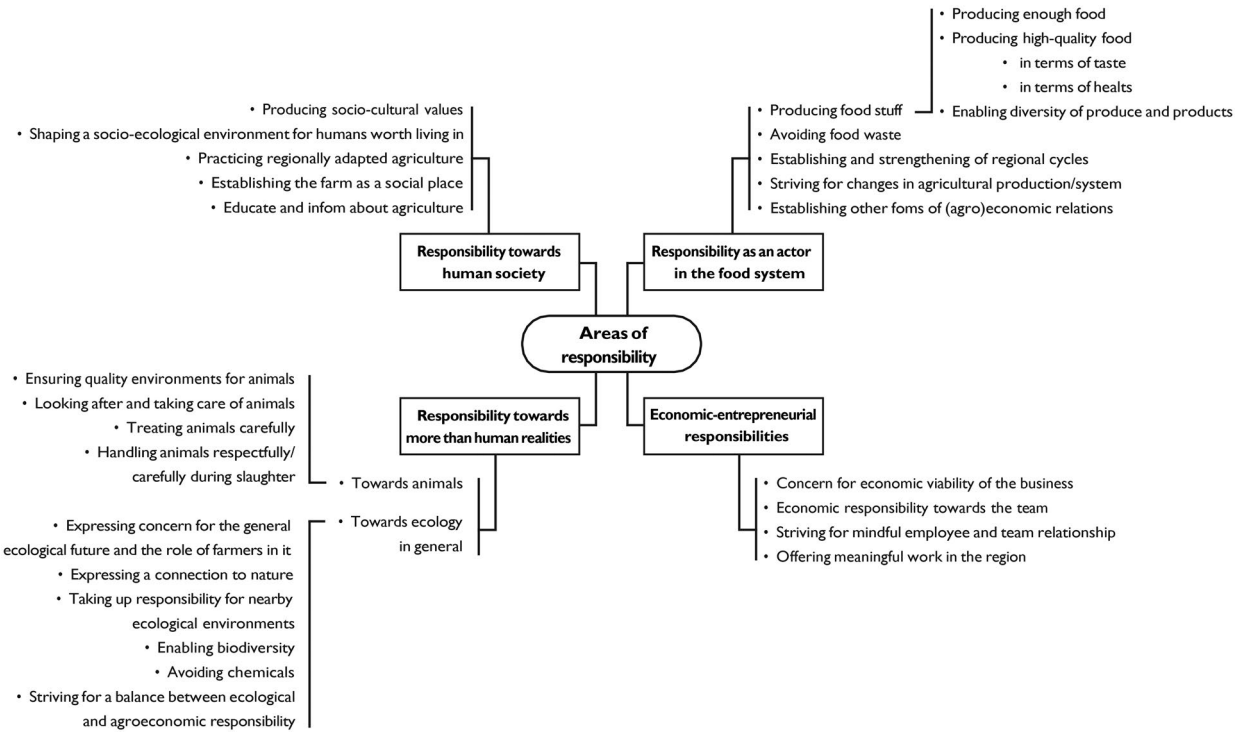

Figure 1. Areas of responsibilities.

orientation for the presentation of my data. The sequence in each area can be read from "mentioned by many/all" to "mentioned by a few/one." In the following, I will address those aspects that relate specifically to the farmers' motivation for direct marketing and that were given particular weight in the interviews.

Responsibility as an actor in the food system

One of the most frequently stressed topics in all of the interviews was of course the production of food. All farmers considered the food supply as one of their primary responsibilities. However, the parameters on which they based their production varied. For Carsten, for example, feeling responsible for producing enough food was the reason he decided to remain within the framework of conventional farming and not change to organic methods. Beyond this, almost all of my respondents expressed at various points in their interviews that they are concerned not only with the quantity of food produced, but also or even foremost with its quality – be it in terms of taste or healthiness, as Andrea explained:

> And I think it's also important to eat natural foods and not just highly processed things, simply because they nourish us more…So it's super important for health care. (Andrea)

In addition to this strongly felt responsibility, a majority of the farmers also saw it as their responsibility to bring about change in some way or another in the food system. Jana, for example, describes a vision of advancing the agricultural transformation within the food system as an important driver for funding an agricultural business – a growing vegan organic agricultural cooperative supported by 600 members. The climate crisis and the destruction of nature was a central point of reference for Jana, and other interviewees also considered agricultural and farm-related decisions particularly in the context of ecological responsibility, which I discuss in the following section.

Responsibility toward more than human realities

In addition to the responsibility to produce (high-quality) food, obligations toward more than human realities seemed to play a decisive role in the specific organization of the farms. Unsurprisingly, responsibility toward their animals was a vital aspect for the respondents involved in animal husbandry, especially for Carsten, Andrea, and Alexandra. Ensuring a quality living environment for the animals, taking care of them, and looking after their well-being and health were frequently mentioned issues in their interviews and are important aspects of their farming practices and decisions. As Carsten showed me around his farm, for instance, he explained that he had decided to demolish and rebuild certain structures to ensure the well-being of his cattle – even though the old structure would have been legally sufficient in most respects.

Similarly, the topic of killing and eating animals was taken up by the meat-producing farmers, Alexandra, Carsten, and Klara. All three touched upon this socially charged topic and framed it in the context of responsibility and ultimately caring relationships. Especially Carsten often emphasized that it is part of his conviction and his way of showing respect toward his animals, of a trustful and caring relationship with them that he is able to determine and oversee the slaughtering process. He describes the killing of a cow which he remembers as having had a particularly "strong" character:

> And then there was peace and quiet and then she [the cow] made it. So she didn't have to collapse on a truck somewhere and then wait with a thousand other scaredy cats somewhere in the waiting area of the big slaughterhouse or something, but she was just allowed to die here. (Carsten)

In the context of growing crops, fruits, and vegetables, responsibilities played a crucial role as well. For Moritz, for example, growing organically is of the utmost importance, since he sees it as the only way to secure the future existence of nature and thus humankind. At the same time, he questions the extent to which large farming businesses are truly able to fulfill their responsibilities toward more than human realities accordingly – even if they produce organically – since the farmers will not be able to truly take care of all the land. As a result, he told me that he will continue to farm his existing land and not seek to expand.

The reflections on responsibilities toward more than human realities very often also pointed to a broader societal context, extending beyond the boundaries of their own farmland and I will thus turn to this in the next section.

Responsibility toward human society

Societal embeddedness and the resulting responsibilities were expressed in the interviews in various contexts. Some farmers reported that they saw themselves as having a responsibility to shape a socioecological environment worth living in for humans and non-humans alike by, for example, maintaining hedges, sowing a perennial bee pasture, or providing agricultural machinery for events in the village.

One dimension of responsibility espoused by all of the farmers is educating the public about the realities of agricultural production. This topic was raised in different ways and, of course, with different consequences for each farm, but all interviewees shared the view that society in general knows too little about the methods and conditions of food and especially agricultural production. The respondents emphasized the need to give people a different, more realistic image of agriculture,

> [b]ecause it's not like a hundred years ago, where you knew a farmer personally because you had one in the family. (Moritz)

One often referred to area of responsibility is still missing, and I will turn to this in the next section.

Economic-entrepreneurial responsibility

As can be expected, sales prices and thus the economic viability of the agricultural businesses in this study were central concerns. Frustration with a low-price mentality was a theme in almost all the interviews, exemplified here by Klara:

> And, of course, the prices of pigs, they push you to the limit, where you can actually see that things could be done differently, but everyone just wants to buy cheap. And I don't just mean the consumer, but also the big sausage factories. (Klara)

Interestingly, the concern about economic viability was almost always related to meeting the other responsibilities, as well as aspects such as the technology required, wages, and the workload of the team. In particular, their accountability as an employer, both toward the team and the social fabric of the region, was mentioned several times.

What became clear at various points in the interviews is the specific pressure that weighs on agricultural entrepreneurs: The almost mundane fact that agricultural activities more often than not include the need to "maintain, continue and repair" (Tronto 1994, 103) living matter, animals, or ecological systems, and that these activities are subject to immediacy and non-deferability. Alexandra expressed this best in the following quote:

> Nobody who has a farm takes time off…the animals are there and thus the work. (Alexandra)

The notion of being at work 24/7, of a high workload combined with hard physical labor and economic pressure and uncertainty, was expressed by nearly every respondent. When asked what keeps them going in the face of challenges and difficulties, the answers often related to the different areas of responsibility outlined above, and thus played a crucial role in the farmers' convictions. The motivation for direct marketing is directly linked to these commitments, as this form of marketing is ultimately a means for the farmers to fulfill their responsibilities as I will show in the next section.

The farmers' motivation for direct marketing – window, stage, and tool for convictions

In my interviews, marketing agricultural produce directly points to the responsibilities and thus convictions of the respective farmers – even though, at first glance, it seems as if direct marketing was considered by the farmers to be the best way of achieving higher prices or financial security. Particularly in the context of CSAs, financial security was an important factor, as harvest shares are sold to the members in advance of the growing season. However, a closer look reveals that the desire to improve value creation is also driven by factors other than profit maximization. Andrea, for example, told me about the need to repeatedly explain her high milk prices, by putting them in the context of the higher production costs – which ultimately result from the choices she has made in relation to her responsibility toward the well-being of her cows. The shared assumption by all farmers was that asking for higher prices requires increased communication in order to explain, justify, and sometimes even convince through tasting. This communication opportunity is seen first and foremost in direct marketing and was also considered as a suitable means of realizing another responsibility, namely informing the public about agricultural production and working methods. The higher prices, however, relate to the farmers' responsibilities: They are necessary to implement the specific forms of agricultural production and working methods which, as shown above, reflect the respective responsibilities. Carsten, for instance, emphasized that for him the question of direct marketing is ultimately a question of responsibility and conviction. By ensuring the welfare of his cattle right up to the point of slaughter, and then being able to oversee the process of producing meat and sausage products of a certain quality, he is able to remain true to them.

When asked if the work involved in direct marketing – something he had been telling me about at length just a few minutes earlier – is sometimes a burden, he replied as follows:

> We work with animals, with living beings, and we all love the job we do here. And when we experience the greatest possible appreciation for the product, no, it's actually a pleasure. (Carsten)

Another central and often mentioned aspect of direct marketing was the opportunity to receive direct (critical) feedback. This played a role in two ways: First, feedback was seen as a necessary aspect of the responsibility for producing high-quality food. Especially Moritz explained to me that he wants to produce food that not only nourishes people, but also gives them pleasure. That is why he seeks feedback on the needs and wishes of his customers. Second, direct encounters and feedback are of high value to the farmers personally and are often a key motivating factor in their daily agricultural work and struggles. For instance, when I asked Annika what she enjoyed most about her job, she pointed to giving products to customers who appreciated them. This also gives her the strength to endure the hardships of farm work.

Consequently, I argue that a key motivation for direct marketing lies in the *appreciation* it enables: The ability to ask for higher prices and receive direct consumer feedback can be understood as a form of appreciation of the animals, the ecosystem, and the agricultural work that was put into the product. I borrow this term directly from Carsten – *Wertschätzung*, he said in the interview, in the sense of positively recognizing and valuing the worth of somebody or something. This notion of "approval, positive estimation; favorable recognition (of worth or excellence)," as the English translation "appreciation" is described in the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, was an underlying subtext in all the interviews. This appreciation points in two directions. The higher prices and the feedback can be seen by farmers as an external approval and recognition that they receive from the outside – an appreciation of agricultural work enabled through direct marketing. In addition, and most importantly, the higher prices also enable an internal appreciation related to the process of agricultural production itself: The farmers in this study try to practice agriculture according to their responsibilities and convictions, almost always based on an appreciation – a favorable recognition of worth – of animals and other more than human beings contributing to agricultural food production.

The motivation for direct marketing can thus be seen as grounded within a structure of multifaceted areas of responsibility. The direct relationship between production and consumption – the resulting space for communication – makes it possible, on one hand, to demand higher prices, as they can be explained and elaborated. The higher prices, in turn, provide the basis for specific forms of agricultural production, in line with the respective responsibilities and convictions. Whether it is, for example, the conscious decision not to expand in order to practice biocyclic agroecological farming (Moritz), or to practice a combination of mother-bonded and fostered calf-rearing exclusively on grassland (Andrea), or even having slaughtering and further processing

carried out on the farm to be able to control these processes accordingly (Carsten).

On the other hand, this communication space also makes it possible to fulfill responsibilities directly – for example, by asking consumers about their needs and tastes or by providing information and education through the direct exchange. As I have illustrated, for the farmers interviewed here, marketing all or some of their food products directly seems to be a consequence or a continuation of their responsibilities and convictions as practicing and producing farmers.

Discussion

It has become clear that farmers do not merely react to existing demand in their decision to market directly (Beingessner and Fletcher 2020). Consumers are certainly important, but not in the sense of a pure market economy of supply and demand. Rather, responsibility toward consumers, as well as toward other multifaceted living realities, plays a crucial role in farmers' various decisions in relation to the agricultural production process, including the decision to market produce directly. This, in turn, clearly answers the question of how aspects of care provide a starting point for the motivation for direct marketing. Tronto (2015) for example defines responsibility as a core element of care. She outlines four phases of care: The first phase contains *caring about* in a sense of identifying needs of the other; the second phase is characterized by *caring for* and thus by accepting and taking on responsibility; the third phase is the actual *caregiving*; and the fourth phase is defined by *care-receiving*, which includes feedback and perhaps the recognition of new needs or the need for improvement. Through analysis of the interviews, I was further able to identify four dimensions or *areas of responsibility* to which the motivation of direct marketing relates to: responsibility as an actor in the food system, and responsibility toward human society and toward more than human realities as well as economic-entrepreneurial responsibility.

The trope of farmers as caretakers of societies' food supply is well known, especially under the paradigm of productivism (Burton 2004). However, my interviewees made it clear that they understand their responsibility for food production not only in quantitative terms but also explicitly in qualitative terms. They considered themselves as caretakers of a food supply that is supposed to be healthy and tasty, in some cases even directly adapted to the needs of the consumers. Direct marketing, I suggest, was in many cases a means for *care about*, *caregiving*, and being able to actively witness the *care-receiving* – an aspect usually separated from the producing farmers in conventional and globalized value chains. Especially the openness and, in some cases, eagerness to receive feedback, and thus the willingness to adapt or improve, is very much in line with Tronto's concept of care, I would argue and thus demonstrates how much a care perspective in the agri-food system could break up established structures of individualization (Busa and Garder 2015). Such a perspective could help in identifying, designing, and evaluating alternatives of agri-food environments by understanding farmers and consumers not as unrelated, isolated actors but as interconnected through complex relationalities and responsibilities (Dowler et al. 2009).

At this point, the inclusion of Tronto's (2015) fifth phase comes into play, the *caring with*, the orientation toward solidarity by taking collective responsibility. In the context of alternative agri-food environments this entails an organization of consumer-producer relationships not through market-mechanisms (alone) but rather a sociopolitical support of agri-food structures that are truly oriented toward the well-being of those involved, including human and non-human beings. Consequently, I suggest including care theories in the critical debate on direct marketing and localization. Melanie DuPuis, David Goodman, and Jill Harrison (2006) caution us, for example, against an "unreflexive localism" which does not change injustices and inequalities caused by globalization. They rather call for "a just and reflexive food localism [which] will work not to erect economic boundaries between a particular 'here' and the global 'there' but to engender and deepen their connection with the people who live nearby" (DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison 2006, 262). Their suggestion is a "New Regionalist" approach in which local food politics promote a more equitable distribution of regional agri-food resources and services. As I understand the authors, this would mean, for example, supporting the introduction of directly marketed food into the public food supply (e.g., school cafeterias, possibly even combined with educational programs). This, in turn, is in line with the motivations mentioned by almost all the farmers that I interviewed, who consider educating and informing about agriculture as one of their responsibilities.

Further, DuPuis, Goodman, and Harrison (2006) point to the need for localized agri-food relationships to meet diverse and differently "situated" (Haraway 1988) demands and needs, rather than simply conforming to a standardized version of values. Similarly, Tronto (1994) reminds us that care should not be idolized or romanticized as inherently

good. Rather, existing care structures can also contribute to the reestablishment or manifestation of power structures, or have an exclusionary effect, if they only affect those who are close or are considered equal. Bringing these strands together, two issues become apparent. First, food politics, aiming at shaping localized, just, and reflexive agri-food environments, need to constantly refocus on the well-being and thus on the heterogenous and diverse needs and values of a complex web of multispecies livelihoods. This normative orientation, second, cannot be fulfilled through a purely market-oriented localism since this would foster existing structures of exclusion and individualization.

In line with these aspects, Patricia Allen et al. (2003) also criticize neoliberal orientations of local agri-food initiatives. In their study with leaders of California organizations, they conclude that for most "changing the food system means increasing the diversity of alternative markets such that the consumers have more choice, rather than making deep structural changes" (Allen et al. 2003, 72). Also, Henry Buller and Carol Morris (2004, 1067) state in their study on market-oriented initiatives for environmentally sustainable food production that "the incentive for food producers to manage the environment positively comes directly through the harvesting of market benefits" and underline the fact that this "reappropriation and revalorization of positive externalities…provides an additional source of revenue for those involved in the supply chain" (Buller and Morris 2004, 1078). However, based on the analysis of my interviews, I would argue that a closer look is necessary and suggest a slightly different perspective: Following Saurabh Arora and Barbara Van Dyck (2021), who understand the refusal of conventional value chains as creating a space for otherness within which ethics and practices of care are possible, I suggest that direct marketing in my interviews was *both* a mode of value creation and a means for appreciation and practices of care. As the analysis shows, value creation in the context of direct marketing can contribute to enabling specific forms of care for and appreciation of the complex web of human and non-human beings contributing to agricultural food production.

Understanding direct marketing as a means for practices of care – as a way to realize agricultural work in a careful way, the results of this exploratory study connect to the analysis by Joseph Murphy and Sarah Parry (2021, 1114) who suggest understanding care as the context for work. However, the authors caution "against collapsing work into care, care into work or offering new neologisms" and "any one-size fits all model of work and care." Following this, I want to emphasize that not all agricultural work can be described as caring or careful. Even though my research suggests that care and agricultural work are closely knit together, further studies are necessary to better understand the various configurations and "dynamic tensions" (Murphy and Parry 2021) between work and care in the diverse and heterogenous contexts of agricultural production.

Conclusion

The starting point of this article was the under-examination of farmers' perspectives when looking at direct marketing. In particular, little attention has been paid to the question of the motivation for marketing agricultural products this way. One explanation for this may lie in the simplistic understanding of farmers as purely economic actors. This would certainly correspond to the hegemonic understanding of economy and agriculture, where decisions are seemingly based solely on maximizing profit and productivity. According to this rationale, direct marketing would only be motivated by the logic of the market economy, by the prospect of increasing value creation. However, the analysis of qualitative interviews with nine farmers in Brandenburg who market directly suggests a different, more nuanced picture and illustrates how aspects of care play an important role in their decision making. More specifically, responsibility to consumers and to other multifaceted realities of human and more than human beings are crucial to the various choices farmers make in relation to agricultural production and value creation. I was able to identify four specific dimensions or areas of responsibility that formed the basis for farmers' motivation for direct marketing: responsibility as an actor in the food system and responsibility toward human society and more than human realities as well as economic-entrepreneurial responsibility. A central, directly related theme that emerged throughout the interviews was appreciation. The issue of appreciation referred to farmers' desire for external appreciation of agricultural work by consumers. However, as a basis for decision making, a form of internal appreciation toward all human and non-human beings involved in agricultural production seems to be much more important. This appreciation was seen to be realized in certain forms of agricultural production and processing which was, in turn, made possible by the increased value added in the context of direct marketing. Following these findings, I argue that direct marketing should be understood as a way of value creation as well as a means for appreciation and practices of care.

As this is an exploratory study, further research is needed to better understand the different configurations of agricultural production, value creation, and care. How, for example, do material factors such as business size, location, ownership, and the specific foodstuffs that are produced influence this relationship? What role do more immaterial aspects such as access to information, skills, and knowledge play? How do factors such as time, communication, and emotion – key to analyzing caring relationships – factor into the equation?

Moreover, it is also important to look beyond food production and consider these issues in the context of biomass production and thus the bioeconomy. Focusing not only on technological innovation, but also on the different socioeconomic configurations of the agricultural value chain and their interlinkages with the well-being of each part of the complex web of human and non-human beings that contribute to agriculture, would certainly be helpful in the search for a more sustainable human-nature relationship. Further research in this direction could contribute to the development of a new understanding of agriculture in which the integral aspects of care within production are recognized.

Notes

1. *Marktschwärmer*, also known as Food Assembly, is a digital platform that connects producers and consumers in regional, direct networks.
2. A regional box scheme is a subscription for consumers to receive regular deliveries of fruits and vegetables directly from farmers
3. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Meike Brückner for her invaluable help.
4. I have translated the quotes from German into English.

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