

**“We love this land, and we want to take care of this land”: Iowa women farmland owners  
constructing and contesting narratives**

by

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**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

DMWW: Des Moines Water Works

EPA: Environmental Protection Agency

FSA: Farm Services Agency

IA: Iowa

IDALS: Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship

IDNR: Iowa Department of Natural Resources

IRB: Institutional Review Board

ISU: Iowa State University

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

PFI: Practical Farmers of Iowa

SWCD: Soil and Water Conservation Districts

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture

WCL: Women Caring for the Land

WFAN: Women, Food and Agriculture Network

WLL: Women, Land and Legacy

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative dissertation studies how Iowa women farmland owners construct their experiences as landowners. I focus on the reflexivity between individual narratives of women farmland owners and cultural narratives of farmland ownership to better understand narrative reflexivity and thereby contribute to “a better understanding of how narratives work and the work narratives do” (Loseke 2007). I identify how cultural narratives influence interactional processes, such as decision-making and conservation implementation, and inform the legitimacy of landownership and land use. How women farmland owners construct meaning about their farmland and use this to navigate decision-making with their co-owners and others has significant impact upon the future of conservation and farmland tenure. Women own or co-own 47 percent of Iowa’s farmland and 52 percent of its leased farmland (Duffy and Johanns 2012), yet we know little about them (Eells and Soulis 2014). I collected data from ten women farmland owner meetings in Iowa and 26 in-depth interviews with women who own Iowa farmland. I used grounded and feminist standpoint theory methodology to identify how women farmland owners construct meaning about their place within existing agricultural narratives and how these narratives influence their decision-making about their farmland. These gendered narratives have both social and ecological costs, posing challenges to the legitimacy of women farmland owners and presenting barriers as they try to actively manage their land and implement conservation.

In the first paper, I analyze how women farmland owners experience social control processes and the role of homosocial spaces in leading to the implementation of change on their farmland. In the second paper, I identify the function and importance of women as placeholders within gendered cultural narratives. In the third paper, I analyze how women

farmland owners' land-as-community framing of water quality as a social problem is supported by generational, ecological, and public health claims. This research has important implications for agricultural and educational outreach, as well as agricultural policy. In addition, this dissertation contributes needed and missing knowledge about an underrepresented group--women farmland owners. Finally, this dissertation contributes to understanding of the reflexivity between social processes and narrative construction. Identifying how social processes influence narrative construction within the symbolic landscape of agriculture described by Iowan women landowners offers points of intervention and transformation, leading to social change in agricultural practice and policy, and, eventually, landscape changes.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

And it's been so helpful that I knew that I could not do this alone. Men at the co-op don't talk. Some men try to help you. Some men don't want you to farm at all; they want to buy their land, and they basically want you to give it to them. [...]

I cannot do it alone, and that's why these meetings are so important to me, because I know that there are programs out there to help us, but I need to know what they are. And I need to know how to get the help that I need. And this is grassroots stuff – we can do this. [...]

When I was growing up, I never saw an eagle, but just in the last 15, 20 years we have that resurgence of it because of what Rachel Carson did. And she said, when teaching children about nature, it's not half so important to know as it is to feel. So we love this land, and we want to take care of this land, so we need to do whatever we can to do that. And that's something that I truly believe in.

*Kristin<sup>1</sup>*

In this dissertation, I identify how cultural narratives influence interactional processes, such as decision-making and conservation implementation, and inform the legitimacy of landownership and land use. I focus on how women farmland owners construct meaning about their experience as landowners and the reflexivity between individual and cultural narratives, thereby contributing to “a better understanding of how narratives work and the work narratives do” (Loseke 2007). In agriculture, ignoring or excluding women through formal and informal practices is supported by cultural narratives that assume the traditional division of labor on the farm is considered “normal” or “natural” (Fink 1986, Neth 1995, Sachs 1996, Saugeres 2002). The gendered division of labor is the continuance of a “long process” of the interaction between patriarchy and capitalism (Hartmann 1976:167). The explicit or implicit barriers experienced by

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<sup>1</sup> All interview participants have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality (Appendix C).

women landowners is the result of a system of oppression—patriarchy—that is embedded within cultural and economic systems and maintained through the circulation of narratives at multiple levels. These gendered narratives have both social and ecological costs, posing challenges to the legitimacy of women farmland owners and presenting barriers as women farmland owners try to actively manage their land and implement conservation.

How women farmland owners construct and contest narratives has important theoretical and applied implications. Women own or co-own 47 percent of Iowa's farmland and 52 percent of its leased farmland (Duffy and Johanns 2012), yet we know little about them in Iowa or elsewhere (Eells and Soulis 2014). To learn more about this underrepresented demographic and its potential influence upon cultural narratives, I collected data from participants at ten women farmland owner meetings in Iowa and conducted 26 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women who own Iowa farmland. Using grounded and standpoint theory methodology, I articulate how women farmland owners construct meaning about their place within existing agricultural narratives and how these narratives influence their decision-making about their farmland. This dissertation builds upon previous research about women farmland owners in Iowa (Bregendahl, Smith, Meyer-Dickerson, Grabau and Flora 2007, Carolan 2005, Eells 2008, Wells and Eells 2011) and in the Great Lakes region (Petrezelka and Marquardt-Pyatt 2011) and contributes to theories of nature work (Fine 1997), landscape construction (Greider and Garkovich 1994, Saugeres 2002), and narrative construction (Loseke 2007).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the maintenance of power on the physical and symbolic landscapes of agriculture through the experiences of women farmland owners. I focus on farmland owners, rather than operators, in an effort to better understand the

circulation of gendered cultural narratives and patriarchal control of land. Landowners are important to study because, as Druschke and Secchi (2014) argue, their one-time decision-making has multi-year consequences on the landscape in terms of conservation or agricultural practices. I focus on women farmland owners specifically because they are underrepresented both as participants in research (Druschke and Secchi 2014, Eells and Soulis 2014, Petrezelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011) and land management decision-making (Carolan 2005, Druschke and Secchi 2014, Wells and Eells 2011). This is a significant gap given their status as owners or co-owners of approximately half of the farmland in the United States (Duffy, Smith, Reutzel and Johnson 2008).

I use a social constructionist framework and grounded and feminist standpoint theory methodology to analyze how women construct meaning about their legal status as farmland owners and their narratives of their experience engaging in social interactions with others in the management of their farmland. Through this analysis, I identify how cultural narratives control women farmland owners' engagement with their land and community (Chapter 2), their place within cultural narratives (Chapter 3), and how they engage in claims-making about a specific social problem related to farmland management—nitrate pollution (Chapter 4).

### **Context of this Study**

Iowa is an ideal site in which to locate an empirical study of social constructions of farmland and ownership. Iowa is an agricultural state with over 90 percent of its land used for agricultural production (IDALS 2014). Iowa ranks first in the United States for production of corn and soybeans, as well as hog and egg production, and produces nearly 30 percent of the nation's ethanol (IDALS 2014). In 2012, Iowa exported over \$11.3 billion in agricultural products (IDALS 2014).

Land ownership is changing in Iowa. Iowa's agricultural land is increasingly owned by those who are not farming their own land, but are instead renting out their farmland to a tenant-operator (Duffy et al. 2008). This change in historic farmland owner-operator trends has brought shifts in social relationships related to land management. These social relationships are especially important to those trying to implement conservation efforts on farmland (Barbercheck et al. 2012, Druschke and Secchi 2014, Morton 2008). Non-operator landowners are an understudied group with potential to address significantly current social and environmental challenges in farmland management in significant ways (Bregendahl and Hoffman 2010, Wells and Eells 2011). We know little about the women who own 47 percent of Iowa's farmland and the majority of Iowa's rented farmland (Duffy and Johanns 2012) beyond that they are underrepresented in decision making and outreach about their land's current and future use (Carolan 2005, Wells and Eells 2011). To realize their potential, however, we need to know more about them than their underrepresentation.

While the distribution of land among men and women has remained stable over the last 30 years, the Iowa Farmland Ownership and Tenure Survey<sup>2</sup> (Duffy and Johanns 2012) reports that men own slightly more farmland overall and women own more land among older landowners. This is consistent with national trends that have found women own more leased farmland (Duffy et al. 2008). In 2012, 62 percent of Iowa farmland owned by women was owned by those 65 years of age and older, 66 percent of land owned by women was owned by married women, and 27 percent by widows; whereas 83 percent of land owned by men was owned by

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<sup>2</sup> The Iowa Farmland Ownership and Tenure Survey is mandated by the Iowa Legislature and is carried out every five years by Iowa State University (Duffy et al. 2008).

married men, and 5 percent by widowers (Duffy and Johanns 2012). The majority of farmland owned by women was purchased (69 percent) rather than inherited (27 percent) (Duffy and Johanns 2012). More land owned by women is debt-free (81 percent) than that owned by men (75 percent) (Duffy and Johanns 2012). Men and women do not appear to differ much regarding their reasons for owning farmland; however, 10 percent more men owned farmland for a long-term investment and five percent more women owned land for family or sentimental reasons (Duffy et al. 2008). In addition to the current social trends of farmland ownership, the considerable economic and technological investment in changing Iowa's physical landscape to be more agriculturally productive also makes Iowa an ideal context for the study of how narratives may both influence constructions of land ownership legitimacy and constructions of appropriate land use.

Farmers and agribusiness industry have made substantial investment to further a specific mode of agricultural production that has extremely altered Iowa's landscape and at significant cost to resources generally considered a public good, such as water. Through the use of subsurface drainage—or tiling—farmers drain excess water from Iowa's landscape, thus facilitating cultivation, especially of row crops. One estimate of the investment of tile drainage in Iowa compares its cost to the construction of the Panama Canal (Peterson and Englehorn 1946:23 in Arbuckle, Morton, and Hobbs 2013:554). In recent years, high market prices for corn and soybeans have placed economic and social pressures to crop less productive and/or highly erodible lands (Alexander et al. 2008), such as prairie potholes and other wetlands. A consequence of the increased productivity of farmland has been the increasing pollution of waterways and erosion of soil (Cox, Hug, and Bruzelius 2011, Naidenko, Cox, and Bruzelius 2012), both which contribute to the listing of 725 waterway impairments on Iowa's

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Section 303(d) list, as required by the Clean Water Act (Iowa Department of Natural Resources [IDNR]), and to Iowa's status as one of the top contributors to the Gulf of Mexico's hypoxic zone (Alexander et al. 2008). This pressure to farm even less productive or marginal land has also resulted in greater competition among farmers for local farmland. Row crop farmers invest in large and expensive equipment that cannot easily be transported great distances to farm. As farmers need more land in order to make use of larger and more expensive equipment and ensure a profit, the competition among farmers for land increases. This has implications for the women who own the majority of the farmland available for rental, yet we know little about how these landowners make decisions related to their farmland.

### **Problem Statement**

Although previous research has stressed the importance of social relationships and social structure upon conservation decision-making (Morton 2008, Pretty 2001), research studying decision-making related to conservation continues to focus on male farmer-operators and largely ignore the standpoint of women farmland owners. Even when explicitly studying social norms and pressures, recent research focused on decision making about farmland fails to consider the continuing exclusion of women as a constraint (c.f. Arbuckle 2010a, 2010b, 2011, McGuire, Cast, and Morton 2013, Morton 2008), thus missing an important half of landowners with legal authority to make decisions about land management. Data about how women make conservation decisions is also missing from the majority of research concerning landscape-level changes (Barbercheck et al. 2012). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), a main funder of agricultural research, has also largely ignored gender in its census and survey research (Druschke and Secchi 2014). While the USDA began collecting demographic information about race as early as 1900, information about gender was not collected until 1978 (Druschke and



Secchi 2014). The institutionalization of this marginalization constrains the engagement of women landowners in conservation on their farmland in the present, as documented through an institutional ethnography of agricultural conservation conducted by Jean Eells (2008) in Iowa. As Wells and Eells (2011) suggest, "the mere inclusion of women in established conservation education programs may be too little too late" because exclusion from programs or information networks is not the only issue (138A). Further, they argue, a re-orientation of institutional narratives from land-as-commodity to a land-as-community orientation is needed if we are to create a more inclusive agriculture (Wells and Eells 2011).

That agricultural research often fails to mention its limitations related to gender exclusion, especially as approximately half of the nation's landowners are women (Duffy et al. 2008), is testament to the hegemony of cultural agricultural narratives: the exclusion of women is institutionalized in our national policies, unquestioned in social interactions, and permeates research designs and analyses. This is of little surprise considering, as Patricia Allen (2004) writes, the USDA and our land grant universities "are 'hegemonic' institutions in the sense that they develop and transmit ideas, discourses, and practices that constitute the 'common sense' of the agrifood system" (p. 55). This "monoculture of the mind" is reflected on the ground, limiting the possibilities for inclusivity and diversity in both research and practice (Shiva 2003). Both the "common sense" and the "monoculture of the mind" of dominant agricultural systems are reflected in the social norms of agricultural communities, where important agricultural information is discussed and exchanged most often at the coffee shop or co-op, excluding women, not because of an explicit agenda so much as it's just how things have always been done.

## **Theory**

In this section, I outline the theoretical framework of the dissertation. I first discuss the social construction of landscape as a theoretical concept, then introduce Loseke's (2007) framework of narratives before detailing the gendered aspects of agricultural narratives.

### **Social Construction**

Sociological research about how we construct meaning about the natural world has focused extensively on the social construction of nature, or how we make meaning of our surroundings through "nature work" (Fine 1997). Environmental sociologists have been critiqued for their treatment of the natural world as a social fact or "an externality rather than a socially constructed object" (Fine 1997:69), or as a cultural construct "filtered through a forest of symbols" (Fine 1997:82). Natural resources, such as soil and water, are "products of historically contingent sociocultural definitions just as much as they are products of biogeochemical process" (Freudenburg, Frickel, and Gramling 1995:369). Greider and Garkovich (1994) offer an integrated framework to understanding biophysical features of the environment and their impacts or consequences upon social groups: landscapes are symbolic environments created as individuals engage in sensemaking with their natural environment and as reflections of their "self-definitions that are grounded in culture" (p. 1). Considering landscape is important to an analysis of narratives because it is within the symbolic environment of the landscape that cultural narratives and social processes influence the action, or inaction, of farmland owners.

This framing of landscape is consistent with Burton's (2004) study of the farm as a symbolic environment from which emerge important symbolic codes about sense of place, identity, and spirituality, as well as success, profit, and legacy. Similarly, Saugeres's (2002) study of a French farming community found landscape to be not only a geographical concept, but

also a process influencing the identities of those who alter and locate themselves within it. This conceptualization of landscape provides a foundation for further study of how landowners engage in sensemaking about their farmland and their position within cultural narratives about decision-making and land use.

## **Narratives**

Cultural narratives offer important frameworks for understanding how individuals construct meaning in their lives and in relation to others. Loseke's (2007) theory of narrative construction, rooted in Berger and Luckmann's ([1966]1967) theory of social construction, explains how meaning-making works at multiple levels to re-enforce dominant and hegemonic cultural stories about who uses land and how. Narratives are an important means for understanding how individuals construct meaning in their lives and relative to others. Stories, while personal, are embedded in social institutions and structures (Smith 2003). As Christian Smith (2003) writes, "We cannot live without stories, big stories finally, to tell us what is real and significant, to know who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and why" (p. 67).

Loseke (2007) describes Berger's (1997) concept of the formula story as being responsible for much of the heavy lifting of narrative construction. The formula story works at multiple levels to maintain narrative levels and to maintain consistency of generally accepted codes (Loseke 2007). Cultural narratives are subject to evaluation and recreation, because not everyone shares or interprets symbolic codes in the same way and through individual reinterpretation these codes may shift or change (Loseke 2007). Symbolic codes within cultural narratives, circulated through the formula story, portray expectations, rights, responsibilities, and norms (Loseke 2007). Formula stories codified within public policies and laws create institutional narratives that categorize people into types who fit the narrative and types who do

not. As individuals engage in navigating their unique experiences, their personal narratives are influenced by cultural narratives (Loseke 2007). Personal narratives, in turn, shape institutional and cultural narratives, and this process is influenced by the narratives of dominant groups in power (Loseke 2007). As certain cultural stories are embedded and institutionalized, they come to be expected (Hopper 2001). Individuals may experience real or perceived pressure to tell a “correct” story fitting these expectations in order to receive services, be acknowledged, or be valued (Loseke 1992). Just as Hopper (2001) found those going through divorces expected to present a particular moral self throughout the legal process of the divorce, women farmland owners may be expected by those in their community, or in agricultural organizations or institutions, to present a specific self through deference to tenants or male family members, or be seen as deviant if they do not. This study focuses on women farmland owners’ personal narratives and how these contest or carry the expectations, rights, responsibilities, and norms conveyed in cultural narratives about agriculture.

Investigations of gender inequality require focus on both micro and macro scales (Hartmann 1976). Schwalbe et al. (2000), in their review of qualitative inequality sociological research, found that social processes reproduce inequality at both interactional and structural levels (Schwalbe et al. 2000); integrating these with narrative analysis facilitates identification of how social processes may reinforce narratives or offer opportunity for intervention. Analysis of the social processes used to maintain and perpetuate dominant narratives is important to understanding their construction, and, ultimately, to contest their hegemony (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

## **Cultural Narratives of Agriculture**

Consistent with Loseke's (2007) theory of cultural narratives, the symbolic codes embedded within the cultural narratives of agriculture are often depicted as opposites. Different agricultural ideologies are often defined in terms of oppositions: centralization vs. decentralization, dependence vs. independence, competition vs. community, domination of nature vs. harmony with nature, specialization vs. diversity and exploitation vs. restraint (Beus and Dunlap 1990:590). Chiappe and Flora (1998) criticized these oppositions as representing male cultural norms, suggesting that even our study of agriculture is gendered.

The institutionalization of agricultural narratives is also gendered. The dominant agricultural system of the United States that is prioritized through formal agricultural policy is often identified as "male" in its prioritization of yield and profit (Eells 2010, Fink 1986, Sachs 1983, 1996, Trauger 2001), excluding specific types of agriculture and farmers that may more often be identified as "female" in their prioritization of community or biodiversity (Trauger et al. 2010, Wells and Eells 2011). Gendered narratives in agriculture marginalize both men and women. For example, masculinity in agriculture is constructed such that men engaging in sustainable agriculture may both be viewed as "other" or "feminine" by their mainstream agricultural counterparts (Peter, Bell, and Jarnagin 2000). While most definitions of agricultural sustainability emphasize the equal value of social, economic, and environmental components (Robinson and Tinker 1995), many fail to analyze power relationships, such as who is, or is not, included in decision-making (Allen et al. 1991:35). Therefore, it is especially important that agricultural research oriented toward finding solutions to ecological and social problems include consciousness of power and privilege lest we work in a "luxury of obliviousness" (Johnson 2005:22) that perpetuates existing oppressions (Allen 2004:88).

Cultural narratives about how land should be used—by whom, and for whom—are defined by those sociocultural groups in power through the use of cultural symbols and reified through interactional processes (Greider and Garkovich 1994:6). Power is “the capacity to impose a specific definition of the physical environment, one that reflects the symbols and meanings of a particular group of people” (Greider and Garokovich 1994, 17). The power relationships involved in defining and controlling landscape experiences are critical to understanding “how physical ‘nature’ is managed and altered according to the dominant set of social values within the culture” (Joubert and Davidson 2010:9). Control of the symbolic power of landscape is a result of the patriarchal control of production (Hartmann 1976) in which men, implicitly and explicitly, marginalize women. As West and Zimmerman (1987) explain, gender is emergent, both “an outcome of and a rationale for various arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions in society” (p. 126). Gendered definitions of land use take shape slowly, over time, eventually becoming expectations for behavior (Saugeres 2002:375).

Even as more women own more land in the U.S. (Duffy et al. 2008), historical power relationships privileging male control of land have not changed (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011, Pilgeram and Amos 2015, Wells and Eells 2011). Previous studies have found that tenants, more than landowners, make land management decisions and that gender does play a significant role in landowners’ involvement in the management of their land (Carolan 2005, Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011, Wells and Eells 2011). Understanding how women landowners navigate these gendered narratives may offer insight into opportunities for more inclusion or change on agricultural landscapes. Of course not all women farmland owners perform their gender in similar, or even in complementary, ways; however, “[w]ithout conceptualizing women as a

group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systemic, structured, institutional process” (Young 1994:718).

### **Methodology**

Narratives work reflexively to maintain power structures, and so there is no “correct” level at which to begin their analysis (Loseke 2007). This study analyzes the personal narratives of women farmland owners to learn more about how they conceptualize and experience gendered cultural narratives. I decided to use qualitative data collection to “gain insight into people’s perceptions of their selves, lives, work, and others” (Saugeres 2002) and to address the need, identified by Petrzalka and Marquartt-Pyatt (2011), Prokopy (2011), and Wells and Eells (2011), for further investigation of how landowners’ social relationships influence their decisions about and implementation of change on the landscape. Quantitative data collection may, as Wells and Eells (2011) point out, “miss important dynamics that characterize tenant-landowner relationships” (p.137A). Data collection for this project follows feminist and grounded theory methodologies. Feminist research is post-positivist in that it emphasizes reflexivity and egalitarian relationships between participants and researcher, including participants in knowledge creation (Small 1995). Thus, I conceptualized this research project in close consultation with professionals working in state and federal program offices and non-profit organizations. In an effort to engage participants as active partners, I have worked closely since 2011 with the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN),<sup>3</sup> the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Iowa State University

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<sup>3</sup>WFAN is a non-profit based in Iowa serving women in sustainable agriculture. Its mission is to link and empower women to build food systems and communities that are healthy, just,

(ISU) Extension, and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to establish partnerships and identify areas of inquiry that will be useful to their own work. In the next section, I will explain grounded theory and feminist standpoint theory as they relate to this research project, the specifics of data collection, my positionality as a researcher, and the reliability, credibility, and limitations of this analysis.

### **Grounded Theory**

I analyzed the data using a constructionist approach to grounded theory that studies both “*how*--and sometimes *why*--participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations” (Charmaz 2014:239). This approach “is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively grounded theory about a phenomenon,” both generating and testing concepts and relationships among concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1990:24). Gubrium and Holstein (2008) explain that “[c]onstructionist research typically deals with the practical workings of *what* is constructed and *how* the construction process unfolds” (5). Kathy Charmaz (2008) argues that a social constructionist approach to grounded theory offers a way to engage the *why* question as well, through inductive strategies of collecting and analyzing qualitative data that include measured assessments of both methods and oneself as a researcher (p. 397, 408). Charmaz distinguishes her approach from the approach of Glaser and previous grounded theorists: “20<sup>th</sup>-century constructionism treated research worlds as social constructions, but not

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sustainable, and that promote environmental integrity. WFAN was founded in 1997 to promote sustainable agricultural and community structures.



research practices” (p. 398). The constructionist approach to grounded theory, as defined by Charmaz (2008), focuses on four assumptions:

1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed under particular conditions; 2) the research process emerges from interaction; 3) it takes into account the researcher’s positionality, as well as that of the research participants; 4) the researcher and researched coconstruct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it.” (p. 402)

In this approach, writes Charmaz (2008), “research always reflects value positions” and it is the researcher’s responsibility to identify these and their effect upon the research practice (p. 402).

Drawing upon Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) original work, Charmaz explains that a constructionist approach to grounded theory adopts the following position:

- treat the research process itself as a social construction
- scrutinize research decisions and directions
- improvise methodological and analytical strategies throughout the research process
- collect sufficient data to discern and document how research participants construct their lives and worlds (p. 403)

Charmaz also draws upon Blumer (1969) and Goffman (1989) to emphasize the importance of researchers knowing their participants’ standpoints in order to understand how they construct their world (p. 403). In an effort to follow the positions of constructionist grounded theory, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process, from the initial proposed research design in a grant proposal throughout three and a half years of data collection.

Throughout the process of collecting data for this dissertation, I participated in a grounded theory seminar, presented research at different stages at academic and applied research conferences, and engaged in conversation and analysis with mentors, colleagues, and research partners. I learned the current challenges of women farmland owners and identified, in consultation with Leigh Adcock, then WFAN Executive Director, and others, a study that would build upon existing knowledge and methods of engagement, while investigating challenges and

opportunities. Throughout the data collection process, I have met with and checked-in with the WFAN program coordinators and executive director to test data collection instruments and finalize next steps of data collection. This process helps to ensure that I am engaging in research “of value” to women and that may lead to further changes or action that benefit women (Devault 1996:34).

In addition, I joined the Iowa Farmers Union and Practical Farmers of Iowa to learn more about alternative agricultural narratives and how farmers and farmland owners navigate dominant narratives in their own communities and on their own farms. I have attended a diversity of agricultural conferences, meetings, and presentations, including meetings for women farmland owners and non-operator landowners, that focused on both sustainable and conventional agriculture. Since 2010, I have also served as a board member of WFAN, and so have inroads to social networks of women landowners and partners with whom I may not have otherwise have had access. In addition, I have shared my research findings throughout my data collection in public meetings such as the Iowa Water Conference, WFAN conference, and an ISU Extension Annie’s Project national webinar in an effort to engage with practitioners and landowners, gaining feedback to inform progression of the project.

### **Feminist Standpoint Theory**

This study of women farmland owners, a marginalized and understudied group, is informed by feminist standpoint theory. Feminist standpoint theory originated in the 1960s and 1970s through feminist consciousness raising efforts to “draw attention to the omission of women in many areas (Brooks 2007:55) and feminist critiques “about relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power” and as both “an explanatory theory, but also, prescriptively, as a method or theory of method (methodology) to guide future feminist research”

(Harding 2004:1). Standpoint theory is a response to the omission of women in sociological theory and research raised by Dorothy Smith (1974) and the need for sociological research to address omission, and oppression, through an interlocking matrix of domination that recognizes the simultaneous existence of both privilege and oppression as defined by Patricia Hill Collins (1991). Collins (1991) explains that studying the experiences of marginalized people can contribute to their subordination by objectifying and recasting their experiences to fit dominant epistemologies; instead, the experience of the marginalized should be the center of analysis, illuminating new knowledge to create new possibilities of empowerment (p. 221). By placing the experience of women farmland owners at the center of this study, I attempt to identify new ways of understanding their experience within larger narratives of power on the landscape and identify possibilities for intervention. Standpoint theory builds upon the call of C. W. Mills to adopt a sociological imagination that “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills [1959] 2000:6).

Like grounded theory, standpoint theory is both a theory and a method. Brooks (2007) defines it as a theory of knowledge construction and a method of doing research, as well as a call to action (p. 5). Brooks (2007) explains that “to shed light on the lives and experiences of oppressed women, and to uncover women’s knowledge and skills that are hidden and /or undervalued, feminist scholars often make innovative use of research methods, develop alternative research strategies, and even construct new methodological techniques together” (p. 57). Examples of such innovative and alternative research methods and strategies are Learning Circles and Field Days, major venues for my data collection, developed by WFAN ([2012] 2013) and informed by Bregendahl, Smith, Meyer-Diderickson, Grabau, and Flora (2007). At Learning Circles and Field Days, women are accepted as experts about their farmland as they share their

own experiences and learn from one another. These events, hosted by WFAN, are intentionally women-only to create space for the women to share their experience as farmland owners, often very personal stories:

Women also still need safe spaces in which to say they don't know or speak about uncomfortable topics. Creating safe spaces gives women the opportunity to discuss issues related to power, not an easy topic to broach in every day conversation. As they reflect concretely on their unique contexts—where they live, the land they own, and their relationships to others—a window may open on how issues of land and gender may play out on the ground (Wells and Eells 2011:138A-139A).

Learning Circles and Field Days offer opportunities for women farmland owners from different ages, perspectives, and interests to come together to share stories. This story sharing is a powerful vehicle for some of the participants and inspires them to future action. Brooks (2007) explains that, for some feminist standpoint scholars, through “the very process of constructing a space that is open to dialogue across women’s different experiences and standpoints, a space where a multiplicity of women’s voices are granted equal air time, we actually build *community*” (p. 625). As Patricia Hill Collins (1991) and Dorothy Smith (1987) both have argued well, standpoint theory “does not imply a common viewpoint among women” (Smith 1987:78). Collecting data from multiple events and using multiple methods --Learning Circles, Field Days, and theoretical sampling for personal interviews -- allowed me to identify both differences and commonalities among women farmland owners in Iowa.

The women in this study all are privileged in that they own farmland, a limited resource and one that, in the USA, has been used historically to centralize power among white men (see Chang 2010, Faragher 1986, Fink 1986, Neth 1995, and Rosengarten 2000). However, the invisibility of women in agriculture has been documented by Sachs (1983) and remains germane today as reflected in research about land management relationships throughout Midwest region of the USA (Carolan 2005, Druschke and Secchi 2014, Fink 1986, Petrzalka and Marquart-Pyatt

2011, Pilgeram and Amos 2015, Salamon 1992, Wells and Eells 2011). The lack of research about women farmland owners, even as their numbers are in near parity with men, is an example of the “conceptual imperialism” described by Dorothy Smith (1974) in which the standpoint of men assumes the knowledge of women. Continued debate and evolution of standpoint theory has made visible marginalized experiences and the interlocking “matrix of domination” (Collins 1991) of oppression, highlighting the simultaneous oppressions and privileges that are part of the lived day-to-day experiences of individuals. Women landowners, while marginalized because of their gender or their vision for their farmland, are also simultaneously privileged in their economic and social status as landowners. In this dissertation, I focus my research on their experience in an effort to learn more both about their positions within agricultural systems and to identify, in a specific context, the reflexivity between social interactions and the maintenance of gendered, cultural narratives.

### **Data Collection**

Previous quantitative research has encouraged further qualitative research to study the nuanced social dynamics of women farmland owners in relation to their farmland management (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011). In addition, recent quantitative research by Brasier et al. (2014) emphasizes the importance of studying women farmland owners at multiple stages of life to better understand how their social power evolves or changes depending upon their life situation, and how they navigate these changes in their relationships with tenants, co-owners, and others. To address these suggestions and needs, I collected qualitative data for this paper in three stages: a series of five Learning Circles held in the fall of 2012, five Field Days held in summer of 2013, and in-depth interviews conducted between December 2014-March 2015 (Table 1).

**Table 1 Data Collection Timeline**

	Y1: 1/12-12/12	Y2: 1/13-12/13	Y3:1/14-12/14	Y4: 1/15-5/15
Phase 1: Learning Circles	9/2012-11/2012			
Phase 2: Field Days		6/2013-7/2013		
Phase 3: In-depth Interviews			11/2014-3/2015	
Phase 1-3: Participant Observation	ongoing			

### *Learning Circles and Field Days*

I will briefly describe the structure of Learning Circles and Field Days before explaining the data collection from each in more detail. The Learning Circle meeting model was developed by WFAN as a peer-to-peer model for conservation learning (WFAN [2006] 2007) based upon research that indicates that agricultural women learn best in special topic meetings in small groups with their peers (Bregendahl and Hoffman 2010). At Field Days, participants visited farms owned or co-owned by women that highlighted conservation efforts. Learning Circles and Field Days were hosted by WFAN in partnership with agency staff in local and state NRCS and IDNR offices and promoted as meetings for women farmland owners interested in learning more about conservation on their farm. WFAN is currently the only organization in the state providing land management outreach to non-operator farmland owners through their Women Caring for the Land Program<sup>SM</sup> (WCL), and so were an obvious partner for this project. Despite WFAN's ecofeminist roots (Wells 1998), participants in WCL have primarily been women involved in conventional agriculture focusing on commodity crop production (Adcock 2014). While several participants were familiar with WFAN prior to the meetings, most did not distinguish

programming and events for women in agriculture -- whether outreach sponsored by WFAN, education programs sponsored by ISU Extension, or other events organized by commodity or interest groups

As noted in Table 1, I gathered data from five Learning Circles and five Field Days. In choosing locations for Learning Circles and Field Days, I worked with WFAN staff to choose locations where they had personal connections at local NRCS offices. The local NRCS offices invited area women landowners to participate through mailed letters and phone calls. In addition, WFAN sent announcement of the meetings to their network and partner listservs, posted advertisements in local newspapers and regional farm newsletters. WFAN planned the Field Days in summer of 2013 in locations near where the fall 2012 Learning Circles had taken place in an effort to encourage repeat participation. WFAN staff and I targeted different geographic locations across the state of Iowa that have traditionally had different types of farms: Northwestern Iowa (historically wetlands/now extensively tiled and very productive cropland), Western Iowa (Loess Hills/along the Missouri River), Central Iowa (productive cropland/lots of recent experience with flooding), Northeastern Iowa (more diversified and smaller farms), and Southern Iowa (more cattle pasture). Ownership situations are often unique, as are landowner stories about acquiring and caring for their farmland. To provide confidentiality for the participants, some of whom attended in secret from their co-owners or spouses, exact locations of the meetings are not specified in my analysis. All Learning Circles or Field Days are referred to with the aforementioned geographic designations.

Women were invited to attend a Learning Circle discussion of their farmland and conservation or a Field Day visit to a woman-owned or co-owned wetland on an area farm. A WFAN staff member, a woman farmer with over twenty years of experience leading and

organizing women in agriculture, facilitated the Learning Circles and the Field Days. My co-advisor, Rebecca Christoffel, and I attended all Learning Circles and Field Days.

Seventy-two women attended Learning Circles and 73 attended Field Days (14 of the Field Day participants had also attended a Learning Circle the prior year). Western Iowa had the fewest attendees (Learning Circle  $n=4$ ; Field Days  $n=7$ ) and Northeastern Iowa had the most attendees (Learning Circle  $n=24$ ; Field Day  $n=7$ ). I collected demographic data in a concept mapping activity at Learning Circles, but did not collect demographic data at Field Days. All participants reviewed and signed consent forms prior to the beginning of the meetings. All forms, procedures, and activities were approved by the Iowa State University (ISU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) #12-367 and #14-527. More demographic information (Appendix B, Appendix C) and consent forms (Appendix D, Appendix E) can be found in the appendices.

Participants in Learning Circles and Field Days owned farmland primarily used for row crops or livestock production. They reflected statewide women landowner demographics in that they were older (65 years and older) and many were widows (Duffy and Johanns 2012). Beyond this correspondence, no further claim of representativeness is made. Older participants at Learning Circles were more likely to be sole owners of their farmland, having outlived spouses, than younger women. Some Learning Circle participants skipped the question asking their age on the demographic form used in the Concept Mapping activity. Land ownership information for Learning Circle participants by age is detailed in Table 2. The majority of all Learning Circle participants reported that the primary use of their farmland was row crops, reflecting the dominant mode of land use on the Iowa landscape.



**Table 2 Learning Circle Demographics**

		Learning Circle Landowner Ages						
Age		80s	70s	60s	50s	40s	20s-30s	N**=#
Ownership Situation	Sole-owner	100% (8)	45%	23%	20%	0	50%	20
	(n=#)		(5)	(3)	(3)		(1)	
	Co-own	0	27%	46%	60%	100%	0	22
	w/spouse		(3)	(6)	(9)	(4)		
	(n=#)							
	Co-own	0	9%	23%	0	0	50%	5
	w/siblings		(1)	(3)			(1)	
	(n=#)							
	Co-own	0	18%	8% (1)	20%	0	0	6
	w/other family		(2)		(3)			
	members**							
	(n=#)							
N*=	8	11	13	15	4	2	53	
*53 out of 72 participants completed the question asking age. **Participants were asked only “other family” rather than parents.								

Learning Circles took place from mid-morning to mid-afternoon at county or state park community buildings and included a light breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snack. In addition to women landowners, WFAN invited women conservation staff from conservation non-profits and natural resource management agencies to participate in the conversation, three of whom were

also Iowa farmland owners (and so were counted as participants in this study). Field Days convened at an easy to find location in the nearest town and then participants traveled by bus or van to visit various farms in the surrounding area.

At Learning Circles and Field Days, I introduced myself as a graduate student at ISU researching women farmland ownership in Iowa and a board member of WFAN. Given my positionality, I participated in observation at various levels of involvement (strict observer, participant-observer, or observer-participant) depending upon the situation. This fluidity is supported by Buch and Staller's (2007) view that no one strategy of observation works equally well in all contexts, and so one must navigate these based upon what was possible in the field, what makes the most sense for the research questions, and how to best gain trust with participants (p. 202-203).

The introduction portion of Learning Circles generally lasted one to two hours during which women told detailed stories about how they acquired or inherited their land, their family history, their length of time on the farm and in the area, family and personal hardships, family and neighbor conflicts, and their dreams for the future of their land. I digitally recorded and transcribed these introductions, then analyzed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). At Field Days, briefer introductions preceded journey by bus to different farm sites in the surrounding community. I took detailed notes during introductions and the in-depth conversations with landowners in the bus. At Field Days, women spent the majority of time visiting wetland conservation projects on farmland owned by local women where they engaged in water sampling, as well as the identification of plants and macro-invertebrates. At the sites, I recorded observational notes of the women's participation in field day activities, their questions, and the stories about their land and farm shared by the site visit hosts.

*Interviews*

In recruiting interview participants, I used theoretical sampling to reflect diversity of phase of life, age, and type of ownership situation. Charmaz (2008) recommends theoretical sampling be used once a researcher already has some preliminary categories developed in order to refine and identify links among categories (p. 205). Data analysis from the 2012 Learning Circles and 2013 Field Days, and review of the literature on women farmland owners (Eells 2008, Petrzalka, Buman, and Ridgely 2009, Petrzalka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011, Salamon 1992, Wells and Eells 2011) informed the creation of different categories of women farmland owners to structure recruitment of interview participants (Table 3). These categories were chosen to better understand the breadth of experiences of women farmland owners in Iowa and how their status may change with changes in life events (e.g., death of a parent or partner, inheritance at death of parents). The categories relate to land ownership, landowner status, marriage status, residence status, and land acquisition (Table 3). The list of categories is by no means exhaustive, but identifies specific characteristics of those owning farmland identified in earlier stages of this research and in previous studies to be influential in decision-making about farmland. It is also noted that women occupy multiples statuses. More information about demographics of the participants can be found in Appendix C.

**Table 3 Categories of Interview Participants**

<b>Landowner Category</b>	<b>N=26</b>
<i>Land Ownership</i>	
sole owner	8
co-owner with siblings	10
co-owner with spouse	8
co-owner with parent	2
<i>Landowner status</i>	
non-operator landowner	19
active farmer/farm partner	5
<i>Marriage status</i>	
married/partnered	16
widow	4
<i>Residence status</i>	
in-state landowner	20
out-of-state landowner	6
<i>Land acquisition</i>	
purchased farmland	12
inherited farmland	17

All (N=26) participants interviewed had either purchased or inherited Iowa farmland. Participants often occupied more than one category, for example, someone could have both purchased and inherited land, or a non-resident farmland owner may co-own her land with

siblings. I included out-of-state landowners as a category in my sampling because, as suggested by Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt (2011), the relationship between non-resident landowners and their tenants in relation to conservation implementation raises important yet unanswered questions in understanding social relationships of land management (p. 559). I chose to call this category “out-of-state landowners” to reflect geographic location as the distinguishing characteristic rather than “absentee landowners” as used by Arbuckle (2010a) and Petrezelka and Marquartt-Pyatt (2011) because even farmland owners who live in-town, or in a neighboring town, might be totally disengaged from their farmland management and so be absentee landowners; similarly, out-of-state landowners might be very engaged in her land management or a landowner’s land may overlap borders with neighboring states. “Out-of-state” seemed a more appropriate category label to use when recruiting and talking with potential participants.

Given the marginalization of women landowners both in land management (Wells and Eells 2011) and research (Eells and Soulis 2014), I chose to conduct in-depth rather than structured interviews in order to learn more about “the subjugated knowledge of diversity of women’s realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated” (Hesse-Biber 2007). These interviews were semi-structured and conducted with an interview guide (Hesse-Biber 2007) that I developed in a qualitative methods course based upon analysis from the earlier stages of data collection. The interview guide included questions related to a landowner’s future vision for and history with her land, as well as to relationships with co-owners, neighbors, community members, tenants, and family to learn how she experiences others’ acknowledgement (or lack of) of legitimacy in decision-making about land management and vision for her land (Appendix F). The semi-structured format allowed me some control over the interview while providing flexibility should new concepts or ideas emerge (Hesse-Biber 2007). Interviews took place in a quiet and

private location, such as a library study room, at a time convenient to the participant. I scheduled interviews using 90-minute appointments with the participants. The majority lasted approximately this length of time, though several lasted far longer. When invited, I interviewed participants at their homes or farms.

Throughout the interviewing process, I identified negative cases, or those whose status or situation contrasts with patterns of landownership emerging from my data, and used abductive reasoning to examine possible theoretical explanations for these cases and further data or insight from the literature to inform my evolving analysis (Charmaz 2014:198, 200). According to Charmaz (2014), grounded theorists use abduction to “go beyond induction” by considering “all plausible theoretical explanations for surprising data, forming hypotheses for each possible explanation, and checking these hypotheses empirically by examining data to arrive at the most plausible explanation” (p. 201). For example, as I interviewed participants, I identified cases of women who actively co-owned land that were conflict-free, were from out-of-state but actively engaged in land management, or were disengaged sole owners. Through the process of abduction, I revisited data previously collected in earlier stages of this project and used it to guide continued inquiry to develop theories about these situations. Because my interviews are theoretically grounded, my data analysis may span both individual to structural levels (Crouch and McKenzie 2006).

## **Coding**

I used grounded theory to code and analyze the data (Charmaz 2014). I constructed codes through line-by-line coding of transcripts and participant observation notes. Throughout this process, I wrote analytic memos that guided my analysis and subsequent data collection. This data analysis was further refined for credibility and reliability through my participation in a

grounded theory seminar during 2013-2015. Together, we engaged in collaborative open coding of the data that was then refined through axial coding in theoretical memos that were discussed in the seminar. Throughout my analysis, I was careful to use verbatim words or phrases as described in the process of narrative analysis so as to not inject interpretation into the analysis (Loseke 2012). Finally, I participated in debriefing sessions with the WFAN organizers and facilitator, checking my theories and analysis with them. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis using Nvivo 10 software.

Women in this dissertation study all are alike in that they own Iowa farmland; beyond that commonality, their experiences are diverse in terms of ownership of, distance from, and management of their farmland<sup>4</sup>. Some own land alone, others co-own with spouses, siblings, and/or parents. They live on their farmland, near their farmland, across the state from their farmland, and across the country from their farmland. They farm, cash-rent, crop-share, hire custom operators, and are retired farmers. They defer all to none of their decisions about their farmland to others. In terms of demographics, participants are all educated and white, and their ages span mid-20s to early 80s. They are widowed, married, partnered, and single. They identify with dominant, traditional, historical, and cultural narratives of the family farm and the preservation of land for future generations of family, as well as new and different narratives, such as healing the land for the land's sake or as a public good, conservation before and even at the cost of production, and the lesbian back-to-land movement.

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<sup>4</sup> Summaries of Learning Circle, Field Day, and interview participants can be found in Appendix B and Appendix C.

### **Funding**

Funding for my time as a graduate research assistant and for the data collection came from a federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Wetland Development Grant<sup>5</sup>—a larger research project studying women farmland owners’ engagement in conservation to improve water quality. There was some overlap between data collection for the grant project and this dissertation project; however, not all the collected data for the grant project are included in this dissertation. Furthermore, my analysis of data for this dissertation project extends beyond the scope of the grant project.

### **Researcher Positionality**

This study originated in my interest about how women farmland owners may act as change agents within agricultural systems. C.Wright Mills ([1959] 2000) reminded sociologists that “[n]either the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (p. 3), and in effort to understand both the experience of the individual woman farmland owner and the larger context of cultural narratives, I have spent the last three and a half years immersing myself in all I can learn about agricultural landownership in Iowa. I am embedded within the realm of agriculture at multiple levels. Through these experiences, I have gained greater insight into the challenges faced by women landowners.

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<sup>5</sup> EPA-R7WWPD-11-001 Navigating the Waters: A Wetland Development Guide for Agencies and Organizations Working with Women Landowners. The content of this dissertation only reflects my analysis as a researcher and in no way reflects the position of the EPA.



Prior to beginning this dissertation work, I spent two years working with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources on an urban watershed case study, and so had familiarity with the institutional and political challenges faced by agency staff, and how these impact services they are able to provide to citizens.

As a seventh generation Iowan who grew up in a rural area during the 1980s Farm Crisis and whose family has had a long history with farming in this state, I understood well participants' concerns about family conflict, future legacy of their land, and the structural changes that had impacted their lives, families, and communities because my own family, friends, and communities have experienced these challenges and conflicts.

My involvement in WFAN began prior to my beginning the graduate program at Iowa State University. I had joined the WFAN listserv prior to moving back to Iowa to pursue my PhD in Sociology and Sustainable Agriculture. At the conclusion of my first semester, one of my professors, Betty Wells, who was both a founding member of the organization and board member at that time, suggested I consider applying to become a student board member. I did, and my application was accepted. I have now served on the board for four years. As a board member of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, I have learned a great deal about the daily realities of women working within an institution that has historically discounted their work and ignored or underserved them. I have also joined other agricultural organizations in the state and attended many conferences focusing on everything from large-scale, industrial agriculture to small-scale organic agriculture.

I was conscious throughout this project that even while I introduced myself as having grown up in a small, rural town in Iowa, my privilege and status as a PhD student remove me somewhat from the daily life of rural places. To address this, I discussed with project partners the

ways I might share my results in ways that benefit the partner organizations even after I graduate and complete this research.

### **Reliability**

I employed several measures to ensure reliability of the analysis. This data collection was part of a larger research grant project, and so data collected were initially coded and discussed with additional researchers before I continued my analysis. The principal investigator for the larger research grant project—Rebecca Christoffel—was also my co-advisor. She attended all Learning Circles and Field Days with me, as well as helped me with initial coding. My co-advisor David Schweingruber led a grounded theory seminar in which we open coded data, as well as discussed analytic memos developed from my analysis. Additionally, throughout the data collection I shared preliminary results and met with partners from state agencies and WFAN to gain feedback about my analysis. Shenton (2004) found that dependability of qualitative research is strengthened through its specificity of research design and implementation, operational details of data collection, and the researcher's reflective evaluation of the project. I have included details as to the how and why the project was designed and implemented as it was, as well as my reflective evaluation, within this section.

### **Credibility**

I sought to place the experiences of the women at the center of my analysis through the empirical collection of rich data. Rich data are detailed and “reveal participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (Charmaz 2008:23). Collection and analysis of Learning Circle transcripts, observation notes, and interview transcripts provided rich data from which to build theories about women's experiences as

farmland owners. To ensure credibility, I engaged in the following provisions as recommended by Shenton's (2004) review of qualitative research projects:

- I used data collection methods already established as an appropriate means for collecting information from agricultural women (Bregendahl and Hoffman 2010, Trauger et al. 2008, Wells and Eells 2011).
- I developed an early familiarity with women farmland owners and their challenges through my involvement in WFAN and other organizations, as well as through consultation with agency and non-profit staff who serve as their advisors or service agents.
- I recruited participants through a variety of channels to obtain as diverse a sample as possible. The maintenance of land records whether by county government or natural resources agencies is not currently adequate for a reliable sample of women farmland owners in Iowa.
- I used triangulation of methods, including participant observation, analysis of Learning Circle transcripts, and interviews. I also used triangulation of sources, purposefully planning Learning Circles and Field Days in different regions of Iowa and purposefully recruiting women in different situations of land ownership.
- I identified negative cases through my interview data collection to learn more about possible explanations for instances that did not fit with developing theories.
- I engaged in frequent debriefing with the principal investigator of the research project, with project partners, and in a grounded theory seminar with my colleagues.

- I practiced reflexivity through transparency with research participants about the scope and intention of the research project, future use of findings, and my own positionality, as well as reflected in analytic memos throughout the process of data analysis.
- I compared my findings to those of previous research to guide and inform my analysis.

### **Limitations**

One constraint to this study is the lack of an existing list of landowners and limited historical engagement with women farmland owners specifically. Federal farm agencies maintain lists of farmers who receive federal program payments, for example, but these recipients may not all be landowners, and only represent a subset of all women farmland owners. County records of agricultural landowners are often out-of-date or include information for corporations or trusts, rather than individuals. A final and related constraint is the limited diversity in this demographic. While I recruited interview participants broadly through existing agricultural organizations and networks, my sample was comprised entirely of participants who would identify racially as white, as would be expected given the historical settlement of Iowa and historical use of land as a means to perpetuate white, male power, and the institutional racism and sexism of institutionalized agricultural programs<sup>6</sup>. Still, Iowa does have non-white landowners, though their percentage is not known but sure to be extremely small. Hannah Lewis (2007) found it difficult to identify and then recruit Latino farmers through official channels such as ISU

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<sup>6</sup> See the *Seagull vs. USDA*, *Love vs. Vilsack*, etc. cases in which the USDA paid settlements to Native American, African American, Latino/a, and women farmers as compensation for discrimination in farm service programs and loans.

Extension or the USDA. Her four study respondents—all men—were found through connections she had through ISU Extension related to another research project focusing on markets for small-scale meat production.

### **Contributions**

This study has both theoretical and applied contributions. The constraints to women farmland owners' active engagement in the management of their farmland offer important insight into structures of power within agricultural narratives. Reflexive relationships are often mentioned as important but then ignored in study of narrative identity (Loseke 2007). This dissertation addresses the need for greater analysis of reflexivity among different levels of narratives—here individual and cultural—by examining how women view their experience as farmland owners and how they navigate relationships related to the management of their farmland. Situating my study within the context of farmland owners, who have complex relationships with their family, neighbors, and tenants, addresses both Burton's (2004) call for agricultural research studying interrelated levels of symbolic meaning and Greider and Garkovich's (1994) call for a broader understanding of people's relationships with one another and the environment. Identifying how social processes and narratives work together to maintain exclusion may suggest possible points of intervention, or "leverage points" (Meadows 2008) within the "structural relationships of power and the ways through which they are maintained by monopolies of knowledge," creating the potential to "challenge deep-rooted power inequities" (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001:70).

Researching the social construction of women landownership will contribute needed knowledge about an understudied group and identify specific social processes and interactions that maintain current dominant agricultural narratives. The explicit and implicit exclusions of

women farmland owners comes at a cost: “The power of epistemology—the process through which people come to know their world—is that it can limit the ways in which solutions are derived, which options are considered available and appropriate, and what types of changes are likely to take place” (Allen 2004:90). The absence or lack of differentiation of women landowners in census and survey data means that we know little about their interests and values and suggests that often the interests and values of their male counterparts are standing in as the default when it comes to informing further study and policy-making about land management and conservation (Eells and Soulis 2014). As Mary Neth (1995) recommended in her analysis of Midwestern farm families, women’s experiences on the agricultural landscape are needed if we are to create lasting interventions:

By focusing on the women’s side of agricultural policy and rural social structures and by listening to the voices of farm people themselves, one can better understand the historical process of capitalist transformation in the countryside and begin searching for new policies that may rebuild communities, promote mutuality and equal access, and create a democratic system of land control and food production based on an integrative view of nature, work, and human needs (P. 13)

Given the continuing trend of women owning more rented farmland, the lack of data about women farmland owners poses a significant challenge to future landscape transformation, be it through adoption of practices in the field or social reforms in agricultural policy.

### **Dissertation Organization**

This dissertation consists of five chapters, including an introduction (Chapter 1), three journal articles (Chapters 2-4), and a conclusion (Chapter 5). The introduction and conclusion speak to the overall dissertation project. The three journal articles, while related, apply different research questions to the data to develop three different research analyses. I chose to write the dissertation using the journal article format to better highlight the three analyses. A timeline and summary of data collection is included in Appendix A.

Study of inequalities must go further than explanations of difference to explore how specific processes of marginalization are related (Schwalbe et al. 2000), to identify the reflexivity among different levels of narrative (Loseke 2007), and to address both micro and macro scales of inequality (Hartmann 1976). The following research questions combine study of inequality processes and narrative at various scales to address Allen's (2008) call upon researchers to "shed light on the ways in which privilege and inequality are socially created and how it is that this must be negotiated by those who are less privileged" in our agrifood system (p. 16).

Obvious short-term research questions about women farmland owners might ask how to increase the participation of women in conservation programs or how to make more women-friendly conservation materials; however, previous research about gender inequality within and beyond the context of agriculture has found that while these questions are important, they do not get to the deeper systemic processes and inequalities at work (Eells 2008). With this look at deeper systemic processes in mind, I examine the reflexive relationships among social processes and narratives at personal and institutional/cultural levels and how these relationships maintain specific constructions of land ownership and land use. Together, these journal articles develop a theory of how processes and narratives are interrelated in the definition of a landscape's symbols and meanings, and specifically how these maintain patriarchal and capitalist social orders within agricultural land management.

In the first paper, Chapter Two, I focus on social control and ask (1) What inequality processes do women landowners experience in management of their land?; (2) What obstacles do these processes create for women landowners?; (3) What is the relationship between these processes of inequality and the maintenance of gendered agricultural narratives? I apply

Loseke's theory of narratives (2007) and Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) generic processes to the data collected from women farmland owners at five Learning Circles and five Field Days. I find that cultural narratives about land management are maintained through two interrelated social control mechanisms—intimidation and control of information—and challenged by alternative, homosocial spaces. This addresses Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) call to future researchers to study how the symbolic resources that sustain these processes are jointly created in concrete settings (p. 443). Further, I extend Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) framework of social inequality processes to include how these processes and narratives work together to maintain systems of power in a specific context. By situating my study within the context of agricultural landowners, who have complex relationships with their family, neighbors, and tenants, my study addresses both Burton's (2004) call for agricultural research studying interrelated levels of symbolic meaning and Greider and Garkovich's (1994) call for a broader understanding of people's relationships with one another and the environment.

In the second paper, Chapter Three, I focus on how women farmland owners negotiate and navigate these gendered narratives in the management of their farmland. Women challenge cultural expectations about who is in control of agricultural landscapes when the management of their land is not tied to a male partner, or when their land management differs from the status quo (Saugeres 2002), yet we know little about how women in agriculture view their land or their relationships with their tenants and family in its management (Wells and Eells 2011, Trauger 2001). To address this gap, and to build on previous suggestions for more qualitative work studying the complex social relationships involved in women farmland owners' decision-making and land management, this paper addresses the following questions: (1) What is the place of the woman farmland owner within gendered cultural narratives of farmland use and tenure?; (2)



What are the symbolic codes comprising the expected status of women farmland owners within this narrative?; and (3) How do women landowners negotiate their legitimacy in relation to their position in this narrative? Using data from 26 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, as well as transcripts from five Learning Circles and notes from five Field Days, I investigate and analyze the importance of the “placeholder” within the formula story of agricultural narratives and how women choose to engage in this narrative given the expectations of the “placeholder.”

In the third and final journal article, Chapter Four, I analyze women farmland owners’ sensemaking of water quality as a social problem in Iowa. Agricultural water pollution emerged as a social problem theme throughout my data collection. When the project was originally proposed in 2011 for funding, Iowa was experiencing a drought and the thought of studying wetlands, or planning Field Days that would feature wet wetlands, seemed a distant reality. When the project began Field Days in 2013, we experienced flooding in areas of the state such that some of the sites we planned to visit had flooded-out roads. By the time I conducted interviews with landowners in 2014-2015, water quality had become a contentious issue. Des Moines Water Works, the facility that cleans the drinking water for Des Moines, Iowa’s capitol city, sued three drainage districts to the north of the city because of the level of pollution (Tidgren 2015). Given the marginalization of women farmland owners (Wells and Eells 2011), particularly in regards to conservation (Eells 2008), this paper studies their sensemaking in an effort to identify their claims and how these may support or offer alternatives to existing frames and solutions. I ask (1) How do women farmland owners engage in sensemaking about water pollution?; (2) What is the place of women farmland owners in the process of claims-making

about Iowa's water quality?; and (3) Do they fit within the frames as currently defined? I identify generational, public health, and ecological health claims that emphasize responsibility on the part of the landowners and reflect a land-as-community orientation to their farmland.

My conclusion, Chapter 5, summarizes the findings of the three papers. I discuss the applied and theoretical contributions, as well as the constraints, of this study. Finally, I discuss future publications beyond this dissertation and areas for future research.

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## **CHAPTER TWO: WE DON'T EQUAL EVEN JUST ONE MAN": SOCIAL CONTROL AND WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS' NARRATIVES**

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Keywords: Social control, narratives, agriculture, landowners, women

**ABSTRACT:** Recent demographic shifts in U.S. agriculture make this a propitious time to study gender and its implications in farmland management. In this article, I focus on women farmland owners' experiences in Iowa, U.S., where women own or co-own approximately half of the state's farmland. I use qualitative data to analyze how interactive processes maintain gendered agricultural narratives. Specifically, I identify how women landowners experience boundary maintenance and othering in the management of their land; what obstacles these processes create for women landowners, and the relationship between these processes and the maintenance of gendered agricultural narratives. I find that exclusion, as a social control mechanism, maintains gendered agricultural narratives by constraining women farmland owners' access to information and implementation of change on the landscape. Finally, I find that the creation of homosocial spaces for women farmland owners may challenge these cultural narratives and provide opportunity for intervention. These findings suggest that gendered processes are essential to the study of cultural narratives and highlight the need for more research studying the reflexive construction of personal and cultural narratives.

### **Introduction**

Land has long been used to maintain patriarchy (Hartmann 1976). Those sociocultural groups in power define cultural narratives about how land should be used—by whom, and for whom—through the use of cultural symbols and reified through interactional processes (Greider and Garkovich 1994:6). Women now own approximately half of the farmland in the U.S. (Duffy, Smith, Reutzel, Johnson 2008), yet recent analysis of farmland owners in the Great Lakes region found that power relationships have not changed among landowners, tenants, and family

members (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011). Despite these demographic shifts, women landowners consistently had the least power when it came to decision-making about the farm. (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt's 2011). Similarly, in Iowa, where I have based this study, women own or co-own 47% of farmland (Duffy and Johanns 2012) yet are underrepresented in decision making and outreach about their farmland's current and future use (Carolan 2005, Wells and Eells 2011) and in land management outreach materials (Eells 2008). The marginalization of women in agriculture is not new: Whatmore (1991), Sachs (1983), and others have documented well how women have historically been excluded from spaces where agricultural knowledge is exchanged or decisions are made. Ignoring or excluding women in agriculture continues through formal and informal practices, and is supported by the culturally held assumption that such division of labor on the farm is "normal" or "natural" (Fink 1986; Neth 1995; Sachs 1996; Saugeres 2002). As the claims process of the recent Love vs. Vilsack lawsuit<sup>7</sup> illustrates, this under-representation is an institutional problem evident in national farm policy and the agricultural economy as well as a locally rooted one.

Previous studies have found that tenants, rather than landowners, make land management decisions and that gender does play a significant role in landowners' involvement in the management of their land (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011, Wells and Eells 2011). Women landowners often defer to their tenants in conservation decision-making (Petrzelka and

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<sup>7</sup> The Love vs. Vilsack lawsuit filed in 2000 by women farmers against the United States Department of Agriculture found the USDA to be guilty of gender discrimination in the administration of USDA farm program loans. As a result, women farmers engaged in filing for claims September 24, 2012 through March 25, 2013 (Women Farmers).

Marquart-Wyatt 2011) and are more likely than their male counterparts to do so (Carolan 2004; Wells and Eells 2011). Inequitable power relations are common between landowners and tenants (Carolan 2004). An institutional ethnography conducted in Iowa by Jean Eells (2008) found that women landowners may be deceived by their tenants in regards to soil conservation measures. The higher rate of land rental among women landowners and their greater reliance upon income earned from this rental (Duffy and Smith 2008) suggests that their farmland may have different meaning to them, or that their relationship with their land and its managers/tenants may be different, than that of their counterparts. Previous research has linked women's conservation decision-making with public good and public health (Chiappe and Flora 1998) and community-oriented perspectives (Eells 2008, Wells and Eells 2011). Further, women are more likely than men to report that they own their farmland for family or sentimental reasons rather than as a long-term investment (Duffy and Smith 2008), which may pose challenges to their legitimacy as landowners within dominant narratives of agriculture that privilege intensification, short-term profit, and maximization of production (Trauger 2001).

This study focuses specifically on women who identify as *farmland owners* rather than those who may identify first as *farmers* because this demographic is understudied (Eells and Soulis 2013). We know already that their legal power does not translate to social power within their communities when it comes to decision-making and implementation of changes on their farmland (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2010, Salamon 1993, Whatmore 1991), but we do not know much about the mechanisms constraining this power. The majority of existing research about agricultural decision-making and land management has focused on farm operators who are men (Arbuckle, Morton, and Hobbs 2012, McGuire, Morton, and Cast 2013, Morton 2013) or their respondents were primarily men (Arbuckle 2010), and the majority of recent literature

studying women in agriculture has also focused on those who are farm operators (Barbercheck, Brasier, Kiernan, Sachs, and Trauger 2012, Trauger 2001). This gap is significant especially given women's recent increased involvement in agriculture as new and beginning farmers (Fenton, Brasier, and Henning 2010) and their eventual acquisition of farmland through purchase or inheritance. Studying how women experience constraint in the management of their farmland may offer new understandings about the relationship between micro-level social interactions in land management and the maintenance of gendered cultural narratives about land management.

### **Agriculture as a Gendered Landscape**

Landscapes are symbolic environments created as individuals engage in sensemaking with their natural environment and as reflections of their “self-definitions that are grounded in culture” (Greider and Garkovich 1994:1). Saugeres (2002), in her study of a French farming community, found that landscape is not only a geographical concept, but also a process influencing the identities of those who alter and locate themselves within it. Those in power control the acceptable symbols and meanings within a landscape, thus influencing these processes of self-definition and identity construction (Greider and Garokovich 1994). Greider and Garkovich (1994) define power as “the capacity to impose a specific definition of the physical environment, one that reflects the symbols and meanings of a particular group of people” (p. 17). Power in farmland management is both symbolic and material—farmland is the site of agricultural production but also a testament to one's longevity and position within the community.

The control of a landscape's symbolic power is a result of the patriarchal control of production (Hartmann 1976) in which men, implicitly and explicitly, marginalize women. As West and Zimmerman (1987) explain, gender is emergent, both “an outcome of and a rationale



for various arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions in society” (p. 126). Gendered definitions of land use take shape slowly, over time, eventually becoming expectations for behavior (Saugeres 2002:375). Understanding how these gendered power relationships define and control a landscape is critical to determining “how physical ‘nature’ is managed and altered according to the dominant set of social values within the culture” because a landscape’s symbols and meanings “reflect what people in cultural groups define to be proper and improper relationships among themselves and between themselves and the physical environment” (Joubert and Davidson 2010:9).

For women landowners, conflict may arise when these gendered symbols and definitions of land use are transgressed or challenged because, as Saugeres (2002) writes, land is power. Such conflict may start “the process of negotiating the meanings of their landscape in terms of changing definitions of themselves” (Greider and Garkovich 2007:16). As Gaventa’s (1982) case study of quiescence among Appalachian residents in the face of the coal industry illustrated, power—even when seemingly held given one’s legal status, rights, or in sheer numbers—is dependent upon knowledge. In the U.S., women have historically been, and continue to be, excluded from spaces where agricultural knowledge is exchanged or decisions about land and agricultural production are made (Leckie 1996, Sachs 1983, Wells and Eells 2011, Whatmore 1991). Whereas Leckie (1996) found that the questioning of agricultural women’s legitimacy may inspire women to seek information through alternate networks or arenas, at times to their disadvantage (p. 304), Trauger (2004) found that women-only spaces are important because they legitimize both the women’s identities and offer “public representation and resistance to traditional constructions of farm women femininity” (p. 301). These women-only spaces may promote a homosociality, or the creation of social relationships among persons of the same sex

(Lipman-Blumen 1976 in Bird 1996, p.121) that may challenge existing narratives and potentially change gendered symbolic codes of who makes decisions, or how decisions are made, on the landscape.

### **Narratives and Social Processes**

Investigations of gender inequality require discussion of both micro and macro scales (Hartmann 1976). An understanding of how social interactional processes are used to maintain this power on the landscape is needed. In this study, I combine Loseke's (2007) analysis of narratives with Schwalbe et al.'s (2000) analysis of inequality processes to analyze how cultural narratives influence women's engagement in their farmland management. Narratives are an important means for understanding how individuals construct meaning in their lives and relative to others. Loseke's (2007) narrative framework, rooted in Berger and Luckmann's ([1966]1967) theory of social construction, explains how meaning-making works at multiple levels to reinforce dominant and hegemonic cultural stories about who uses land and how. Narratives are "our most elemental human genre of communication and meaning-making, an essential way of framing the order and purpose of reality," and, while personal, are embedded in social institutions and structures (Smith 2003:151-152). Narratives, through their categorization of those who fit the narrative as "good" and those who do not fit the narrative as "other," further social inequalities (Alexander 1992 in Loseke 2007).

The dominant cultural narrative of American agriculture is productivity. This narrative describes an input-intensive model of agriculture that dominates the rural landscape and federal agricultural policies. The productivity narrative favors intensification of the farm through increased dependence upon mechanization, inputs, technology, and expansion, concentration as fewer landowners own more land, and specialization rather than diversification (Trauger

2001:54). Cultural narratives of agriculture are gendered in favoring specific types of practices and specific types of farmers who fit the ideal of productivity, thus marginalizing others who may pursue more diverse or alternative forms of agriculture (Trauger 2004, Wells 1998, Wells and Eells 2011). In agriculture, power has been held by those who perpetuate the narrative of productivity on the landscape and who are, most often, men. In this way, our cultural narratives of agriculture are masculinized, marginalizing alternative forms of agriculture and women (Brandth 1994, Sachs 1983, Salamon and Keim 1979, Shorthall 2001).

As individuals navigate their experiences in the social world, their personal narratives are influenced by cultural narratives (Loseke 2007). Cultural narratives are subject to evaluation and recreation, because not everyone shares or interprets symbolic codes in the same way and through individual reinterpretation these codes may shift or change (Loseke 2007). This process of sensemaking is important to understanding how personal narratives in turn shape institutional and cultural narratives, and how this process is influenced by the narratives of dominant groups in power (Loseke 2007). Women farmland owners who defer their decision-making may negotiate their identities as farmland owners in ways that support, rather than challenge cultural narratives (Brandth 1994, Pini 2005).

Analysis of the social processes used to maintain and perpetuate the gendered narratives is important to understanding their construction, and, ultimately, to contest their hegemony (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). To analyze the continuation of these narratives, I focus on two social processes that Schwalbe et al. 2000 found to reproduce inequality at both interactional and structural levels: boundary maintenance and othering. *Boundary maintenance* is the process by which the dominant group maintains power through protection of material and cultural capital through symbolic, interactional, and spatial boundaries, or a combination of these (Schwalbe et

al. 2000, 430). *Othering* describes processes by which the dominant group assigns to the inferior or subordinate group categories or ideas (Schwalbe et al. 2000:422). Through othering, “meanings are created that shape consciousness and behavior, such that inequality is directly or indirectly reproduced” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:423).

Analyzing how processes regulate narratives may help, as Schwalbe et al. (2000) suggest, to build upon existing interactionist studies of inequality that have focused upon inequality linkages or negotiations in order to better understand how it is that inequality continues (p. 444) and, perhaps as Loseke (2007) proposes, to create new narratives. Through analysis of women’s own experiences of interactional processes related to their farmland management, I study how they both perform and navigate gendered expectations (West and Zimmerman 1987) while also offering opportunities for intervention and change (Deutsch 2007). I acknowledge that not all women farmland owners perform their gender similarly or even in complementary ways and that their performances may change given time and place; however, I group women farmland owners in order to, as Young (1994) writes, “conceptualize oppression as a systemic, structured, institutional process” (p. 718).

My analysis of women farmland owners’ personal narratives, asks (1) How do women farmland owners experience othering and boundary maintenance in the management of their land? (2) What obstacles do these processes create for women landowners who wish to implement change? (3) What is the relationship between these processes and the maintenance of gendered agricultural narratives?

## **Methods**

Previous quantitative research has encouraged further qualitative research to study the nuanced social dynamics of women farmland owners’ relationships related to their farmland

management (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011). In this study, I focus specifically on women farmland owners rather than women farm operators in an effort to better understand how micro-level social interactions maintain gendered cultural narratives even as women have legal power and authority to implement change on their landscape. I define women farmland owners as those individuals who identify as women and own farmland either as sole owners or as co-owners with siblings, spouses, or others. Women farmland owners do not have associations of their own, nor do they congregate as a group at agricultural conferences frequented by farmers. I chose to work with the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) as they already have the inroads to reach women farmland owners and a reputation for organizing events that cater to this demographic. WFAN is currently the only organization in Iowa providing land management outreach to non-operator farmland owners through their Women Caring for the Land Program<sup>SM</sup> (WCL). Participants in WCL have primarily been women involved in conventional agriculture focusing on commodity crop production (Adcock 2014).

I collected data for this study at ten women-only farmland owner meetings hosted by WFAN throughout Iowa during October-November 2012 and May-July 2013. These meetings were offered as part of the Network's larger existing portfolio of women farmland owner meetings in Iowa and neighboring states. Five of these meetings were Learning Circles held in the fall of 2012 and five were Field Days held in nearby locations the following summer of 2013. In choosing locations for the Learning Circles and Field Days, I worked with WFAN staff to choose locations where they had existing connections. In scheduling the locations of the Learning Circles and Field Days, we purposefully targeted five different geographic areas that have traditionally had different types of farms and land use. Landowners' ownership situations are often unique, as are their stories about acquiring and caring for their farmland. In effort to

provide confidentiality for the participants, some of whom attended in secret from their co-owners or spouses, all Learning Circles or Field Days are referred to with their geographic locations rather than specific meeting locations.

To recruit meeting participants, WFAN sent announcement of the meetings to their network and partners' listservs, posted advertisements in local newspapers and regional farm newsletters, and worked with local staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) offices to send letters to local women landowners. Women were invited to attend a discussion of their farmland and conservation (for the Learning Circles) or attend a Field Day visiting a woman-owned wetland on a farm in the area where they would engage in water sampling and activities designed to identify plants and different macroinvertebrates. A WFAN staff member, a woman farmer with over twenty years of experience leading and organizing women in agriculture, facilitated the Learning Circles and hosted the Field Days.

Demographic data were collected in a concept mapping activity at the Learning Circles but not at the Field Days. All participants reviewed and signed consent forms prior to the beginning of the meetings. All forms, procedures, and activities were approved by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRBID #12-367). Participant numbers by region are detailed in Table 4.

**Table 4 Learning Circle and Field Day Demographics by Region**

	Learning Circle (N=72)	Field Day (N=73)*
Northwestern Iowa	n=13	n=19
Northeastern Iowa	n=22	n=17
Central Iowa	n=17	n=16
Southern Iowa	n=16	n=14
Western Iowa	n=4	n=7

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\*14 participants had previously attended a Learning Circle

Participants reflected statewide women landowner demographics in that they were older (65 years and older) and many were widows (Duffy and Johanns 2012). Beyond this correspondence, no further claim of representativeness is made. Older participants at the Learning Circles were more likely to be sole owners of their farmland, having outlived spouses, than younger women. Not all Learning Circle participants completed the question on the demographic form asking their age. Land ownership information for the Learning Circle participants who shared their age is detailed in Table 5. The majority of all Learning Circle participants reported that the primary use of their farmland was row crops, reflecting the dominant mode of land use on the Iowa landscape.

The Learning Circle meeting model was developed by WFAN as a peer-to-peer model for conservation learning (WFAN [2006] 2007) based upon research that indicates that agricultural women learn best in special topic meetings in small groups with their peers (Bergendahl and Hoffman 2010). Learning Circles took place from mid-morning to mid-

afternoon at county or state park community buildings and included a light breakfast, lunch, and afternoon snack. In addition to women landowners, WFAN invited women conservation staff from conservation non-profits and natural resource management agencies to participate in the conversation, three of whom were also farmland owners (and so were counted as participants in this study). Field Days convened at an easy to find location in the nearest town and then participants traveled by bus or van to visit various farms in the surrounding area.

I attended these meetings and introduced myself as a graduate student at Iowa State University researching women farmland ownership in Iowa and a board member of WFAN. While several were familiar with the WFAN prior to the meeting, most did not distinguish programming and events for women in agriculture--whether outreach sponsored by WFAN, education programs sponsored by ISU Extension, or other events organized by commodity or interest groups. Given my positionality, I participated in observation at various levels of involvement (strict observer, participant-observer, or observer-participant) depending upon the situation a fluidity supported by Buch and Staller's (2007) view that no one strategy of observation works equally well in all contexts, and so one must navigate these based upon what was possible in the field, what makes the most sense for the research questions, and how to best gain trust with participants (p. 202-203).



**Table 5 Learning Circle Demographics**

		Learning Circle Landowner Ages						
Age		80s	70s	60s	50s	40s	20s-30s	N**=#
Ownership Situation	Sole-owner	100% (8)	45%	23%	20%	0	50%	20
	(n=#)		(5)	(3)	(3)		(1)	
	Co-own	0	27%	46%	60%	100%	0	22
	w/spouse		(3)	(6)	(9)	(4)		
	(n=#)							
	Co-own	0	9%	23%	0	0	50%	5
	w/siblings		(1)	(3)			(1)	
	(n=#)							
	Co-own	0	18%	8% (1)	20%	0	0	6
	w/other family members**		(2)		(3)			
(n=#)								
N*=	8	11	13	15	4	2	53	
*53 out of 72 participants completed the question asking age.								
**Participants were asked only “other family” rather than parents.								

The introduction portion of the meeting generally lasted one to two hours during which women told detailed stories about how they acquired or inherited their land, their family history, their length of time on the farm and in the area, family and personal hardships, family and neighbor conflicts, and their dreams for the future of their land. These introductions were

digitally recorded and transcribed, At Field Days, participants did a shorter version of the introductions together before we went by bus to different farm sites in the surrounding community. I took detailed notes both during introductions and during in-depth conversations with landowners in the bus. At the Field Days, women spent the majority of the time visiting wetland conservation projects on farmland owned by local women where they engaged in sampling and identification. I recorded observational notes of the participants' participation in sampling, the questions they asked, and the stories shared by the landowners whose farms we visited.

I used grounded theory to code and analyze the data (Charmaz 2014). I constructed codes through line-by-line coding of transcripts and participant observation notes. Throughout this process, I wrote analytic memos that guided my analysis and subsequent data collection. This data analysis was further refined for credibility and reliability through my participation in a grounded theory seminar during 2013-2015. Together, we engaged in collaborative open coding of the data that was then refined through axial coding in theoretical memos that were discussed in the seminar. Throughout my analysis, I was careful to use verbatim words or phrases as described in the process of narrative analysis in order to not inject interpretation into the analysis (Loseke 2012). Finally, I participated in debriefing sessions with the WFAN organizers and facilitator, checking my theories and analysis with them. Transcripts were analyzed using Nvivo 10 software. This analysis generated a theory of social control as a mechanism to maintain gendered narratives of farmland ownership.

### **Social Control: Maintaining a Gendered Landscape**

This analysis identifies how exclusion maintains and enforces gendered cultural narratives, thereby acting as a social control mechanism to encourage conformity and social

repression (Janowitz 1975). In this section I will analyze women farmland owners' experiences of exclusion through the interrelated processes of othering and boundary maintenance in relationship to their land management through the control of information and, ultimately, landscape changes. The women described experiences of exclusion through stories of their interactions with family, community members, and agricultural advisors. Exclusion, through boundary maintenance and "othering," maintained cultural narratives of appropriate land use and appropriate land decision-makers. This continued marginalization was illustrated by the women's stories of their exclusion when they 1) sought information about farmland management or 2) engaged or planned to engage in land management changes. Finally, I will discuss how the creation of homosocial spaces for women farmland owners may challenge these cultural narratives and provide opportunity for intervention. These findings suggest that gendered processes are essential to the study of cultural narratives and highlight the need for more research studying the reflexive construction of personal and cultural narratives.

### **Control of Information**

Women farmland owners interested in learning more about land management practices find themselves outside the cultural boundaries of informal spaces such as the coffee shop, co-op, or grain elevator, as well as in formal spaces, such as the state or federal agency office. These spaces do not explicitly exclude women, but cultural acceptance of these spaces and the conversations therein as male-centered may be widely acknowledged to the extent that boundary maintenance is implicit. Exclusion occurred at the level of individual social interactions to maintain insider or local knowledge related to land management.

A regular topic of discussion at all meetings was the difficulty in talking with men about farmland management at spaces where the men usually congregated to talk shop, e.g., "the guys

at the co-op.” Most women did not even try to engage in conversation with the men in these spaces. Women who did acknowledged that they were violating the symbolic codes of power related to land management in their communities:

Men at the co-op don’t talk. Some men try to help you. Some men don’t want you to farm at all; they want to buy their land, and they basically want you to give it to them.

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

Women also acknowledged the lack of a space in their community for women:

I find it really difficult to find other women in my situation that do own farmland. Because I have tried going to the co-ops for coffee, and it doesn’t work. They just clam up...

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

and

Like you say, the guys all know from hundreds of years from history and farming. They’ve got this whole network thing. So that’s why I’m here, curiosity.

Western IA Learning Circle

Whether it was implicit or explicit, women understood that there were spaces where information was exchanged where they were not welcome. The boundary maintenance of these gendered spaces was enforced by both women and men, and tied not just to the maintenance of control of the land by men but also the control of family arrangements. One divorced woman reported that despite her extensive attendance at mixed gender farm trainings and seminars, when she entered certain spaces she was viewed as someone looking for a marriage partner rather than someone seeking information about agriculture:

And talking about going someplace like a co-op to talk to people... I think they’re a little more lenient. But... divorce, as soon as you talk to a man, right away the wife is standing there... “What are you talking about? He’s mine.” I have no intention of getting him. Once around is enough.

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

This was echoed at other meetings, as well:

That's true, yes. And if you go to the grain elevators there's always men around. If you ask them "What do you think the price of corn is going up?" they're saying, "My wife at home..." to tell you they do have a wife. You know, it's just, I don't care. You know what I mean?"

Southern IA Learning Circle

Even in formal institutional spaces intended for the exchange of agricultural production or land management information, women shared stories about how they felt unwelcome or felt their presence might be threatening to previous arrangements about land use, especially as farmers increasingly compete for nearby land acres to increase their farming operations and thus remain profitable. For example, some women had extended family members who worked as staff members at the USDA services office, or their tenants did, and the women worried about going in to find out information about new or different conservation programs and inspiring distrust with their tenants. Even being seen entering the local USDA services office might trigger a comment to the woman's farmland tenant and inspire distrust or accusation that she was changing something without consulting him; the expectation being that even if women legally own their land, its management is still their husband's or son's or tenant's—the man's—"business". Further, situations in which the women felt they were acknowledged as equal partners by their spouses or co-owners, they shared acknowledgement of larger cultural levels of social control when working with federal institutions, as described by this farmland owner:

The other thing was, it's been interesting to me to own land with my husband. It is very clear in the system, he is number one and I am number two. But in terms of the land and who figured it out and who did all the bidding on the land and who found it, it's me, you know, who manages the land.

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

When reassured by fellow Learning Circle attendees that they should contact a specific contact at the office who would be supportive or understanding, women expressed concern that others in town may find out and convey the news to farmland co-owners or tenants, thus jeopardizing these relationships. In this way, cultural narratives about who is the rightful decision-maker

about the farmland controlled women's access to information and maintained gendered boundaries of land management information.

A story shared by a conservation professional—"Sally"—and a landowner—"Margaret"—offers another illustration of how seeking information through formal means may transgress existing boundaries. Margaret called Sally to ask her to come to her land and survey its potential for enrollment in a federal conservation program. Margaret came out to Sally's farm and walked her land with her. A few days later, Margaret found out that Sally's farm tenant—"Bob"—had called Margaret's boss (also a man) complaining that Margaret was out of line in meeting with "his landlady" and was jeopardizing his arrangement. Bob had not called Margaret or Sally to discuss this prior to calling Margaret's boss, a man. In sharing this story, Margaret and Sally remarked how odd it was to them that the tenant would see it as "his right" to be involved in their discussion or the decision about conservation on Sally's land. Sally said she had every intention of discussing the future plans with him once she knew her options. Margaret and Sally had transgressed boundary maintenance by engaging in information exchange and potential decision-making without first consulting Bob. In contacting the boss, Bob engaged in a symbolic and material act of power as he attempted to re-establish dominant symbolic codes of the cultural narrative.

### **Control of Land Management Changes**

Women who implemented or attempted to implement changes on their farmland faced implicit and explicit exclusion because their actions transgressed boundaries as defined by cultural narratives and they risked being othered for their transgressions. One woman shared a particularly emotional example of exclusion. Her family and extended community had ostracized her because of her land management decisions, to the point that she no longer attended her

family's church or shopped at her local grocery store. The woman was the sole owner of her farmland and had rented the land to her nephew, but disagreed with her family that she should drain a wetland on her property in order for her nephew to have more acres to farm:

But anyway I've had relatives, and one brother particularly, and my neighbor who are oppressing me greatly. And I actually came here just to be with women, because they're bullying me. [...] But anyway, terrible pressure. My brother-in-law has just stated ugly things. In fact, girls, I want to tell you the last thing that happened. About two and a half months ago my telephone rang, and it was this woman, and she told me who she was. She goes to [the church] where I was baptized, confirmed, my first wedding. I don't go anymore because of this kind of thing. She said, "Do you know that brother-in-law is cursing you up one side and down the other at the social... after church." [...] Anyway, these, they're really bullies is what they are, and they have tempers, both, one on one side and one on the other. And I've really been pressured, and I'm saying, "No. That is wetland." The ducks and the geese come in when the guns start shooting, you know, out of the Mississippi. I'm just one neighbor's farm, and then it's the Mississippi. And so I'm just having a hard time being pressured as a woman alone there. And I'm very strong, and I've stood up. And I should tell you that I did..., by my children say, "Mom, you shouldn't be there. You don't have to take this." Oh, my son is just very upset. But anyway I said – It doesn't bother me. I'd like to keep this. You never know. I have water here. I have a place to grow food. I love that I have timber, I have wetlands, I have a spring. I mean, it's glorious."

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

Tension or conflict over the appropriate land use and difference in values were common experiences shared by landowners. In the Midwest, where the pressure to expand farm operations is ever present, farmers are removing conservation features (such as wetlands, in the example above, or riparian areas along rivers and streams), as well as fencerows to plant another row or two of crop. Fence is an expensive investment on the farm, and its removal usually means the land will no longer be used for grazing livestock, permanently changing the land's future use. This tension over appropriate land use is illustrated in the following woman's story. This landowner co-owns land with her four sisters and they rent the land to a nephew. She expresses her frustration about how she feels their perspective as women co-owning farmland is not taken seriously:

Well, we have 500 acres, my sisters and I, that we inherited in [Name of county], and it's all row crop, and my nephew... And we butt heads with the nephew – you're putting in fences, and he's taking out fences, and it's so frustrating. And our dad and mother left us sisters, and we

sometimes need a brother in there too. So the four of us, the five of us, we don't equal even just one man. It's just so hard.

Southern IA Learning Circle

For this woman landowner, the removal of fence symbolized far more than just a disagreement about a current use of her farmland—it means that her farmland, long into the future, will only be used as a crop field and no longer be used for pasture even though field rotations offer one way for farmland owners to rest and rebuild soil fertility on their land. Further, she acknowledges that in relation to her nephew and, in a larger sense, in the management of her land within her current social situation, she and her sisters (who own the farm together) are not acknowledged as legitimate decision-makers because of their gender. Women farmland owners—even five of them—“don't equal even just one man” because women farmland owners are seen as “other,” not possessing the needed knowledge or experience to actively manage the farmland appropriately.

Another participant's story about her land highlights her acknowledgement of culturally appropriate land use (production in row crops) versus inappropriate land use (conservation to conserve soil). The woman had sold her farmland except for 34 acres, which she kept to rent for income. She realized that her tenant was abusing the land, and so she took the land out of production and placed it into the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which provides



farmland owners some payment (the rates are currently less than what they would make in crop production) to put formerly farmed ground into conservation:

So then I kept 34 acres, and I rented that to cropland. And I just felt like he was just ruining the land. If my renter would have done a good rotation – oats, hay, corn, beans – if he'd have done a good rotation, but all it was, plant those things in just as narrow rows as you can, and just push that land and just push it. And I decided I'm going to put it in CRP. And so I did. And all the neighbors think I'm just crazier than a hoot. Yeah, the neighbors all wanted to buy it. I mean, they're after me all the time to buy it. And then I also put in a windbreak, because all this, you see them tear out every tree. Oh, it just makes me sick. And how are we going to stop all this wind and soil erosion if we don't plant some trees?

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

Her articulation of the neighbors' reactions—that they are “after” her all the time to buy the land and that they think she is “crazier than a hoot,” are examples of othering. Her land use practices (conservation vs. production) challenges the dominant use of farmland and her legitimacy as a decision-maker is not respected. The descriptions of neighbors, family members, and others bullying women landowners, not viewing them as “equal to,” or going “after” them because their land management did not fit culturally accepted land use are each examples of how the landscape embodies gendered and patriarchal narratives about who should make decisions and how.

Perhaps nothing symbolizes the maintenance of gendered boundaries as the men these women referred to as “vultures” and “ambulance chasers.” These men believed the women to be incapable of or disinterested in making decisions about their land. A participant at a Field Day shared she remembered an “ambulance chaser” appearing on her family's front porch to talk with her mother shortly after her father had died. Another described the “vultures” circling her farm, waiting for her to sell. These “vultures” and “ambulance chasers” were often known to the women—community members, neighbors, family members—who pressured them to sell land, rent land, or somehow were attempting to gain entry into their farm operation. One woman

explained how she routinely receives calls from farm management companies wanting to be hired to take over decision-making about her farm:

My husband's been dead six years, and they call me on the phone, and they'll say, "I always talk to [husband's name]." And I'll say, "What is this about? I can help you. I'll tell you where to find him." And I just got the call last week, and they says, "Oh, I talked to him a couple months ago," and I said, "Oh, you did?" Or I might say (if I have time, I'll play with them), and he'll say, "How can I reach him," and I says, "Heaven." And then they go, "How do you spell 'heaven,'" and sometimes they'll say, "Where's that located?" And there's this dead silence and they don't know what to say. But it's amazing how I still get that.

Southern IA Learning Circle

The caller assumed that she, as a woman, would not be the person in charge of land decisions. Given the pressure for farmers to farm more acres to produce more corn and beans in order to remain competitive in the commodity markets, and the need for these acres to be near one another because of the difficulty and expense in transporting large farm equipment, it is not a surprise that the women reported pressure to sell or rent their land, or to manage their farmland in a way that better fit with cultural narratives about land use. While "vulture" and "ambulance chaser" suggest negative connotations, some women described these same people positively and sincere in their efforts "to help" or to "take over" something they assumed a burden to the women, highlighting the double-standard of the cultural narratives that allowed men the ability to make assumptions about or to intrude into the lives of these women landowners; yet the women were not permitted the same leniency.

Just as Loseke found (1992) that domestic violence support groups helped to keep personal stories on track with institutionally preferred themes, plots, and characters (p. 121), the co-op or coffee shop were spaces where men were involved in the "*collaborative production of narratives and the collaborative production of identities*" (p. 121, italics in original) to fit institutionally preferred narratives about gender and agriculture. These spaces, implicitly, were

homosocial—created and meant for use by men. The Learning Circles and Field Days, similarly, were spaces of collaborative and homosocial production, but ones that challenged narratives.

### **Homosocial Spaces and Creation of Community**

I identified three ways that women at the Learning Circles and Field Days challenged their exclusion through homosocial space. First, these spaces provided opportunities for knowledge sharing. Second, they validated the experiences of women farmland owners as they realized their individual experiences were part of a larger collective story that included the agency staff members, showing that the constraints faced through their individual lives were not only personal, but were institutional and cultural. Finally, these spaces created alliances among landowners and among landowners and agency staff in ways that some acknowledged as subversive.

The women-only meetings provided the opportunities for the landowners to acquire and share cultural capital that otherwise they were excluded from or from which they felt intimidated in acquiring. Women were motivated to attend the meetings to gain validation, knowledge, and to connect with others in similar situations:

Several years ago I lost my husband, so I have kind of the management of the farm. It's just a small farm; but my sons are not interested at all, so I would like to get the knowledge to kind of manage it, because I don't want to do it myself. And I'm just looking for sources of information. A couple of young guys around are renting the pasture and farming this little plot that's on the side, but they know so much more than I do, I feel like I know nothing about what I should expect or what's available or how to get bids on different things. And I just need a little confidence to handle those guys. You know what I mean?

Western IA Learning Circle

Information sharing was a large part of the introductory portion of the meeting. As women introduced themselves and shared why they were there, they exchanged important information, often interrupting one another to offer more ideas/suggestions:

I learned so much through Annie's Project<sup>8</sup> to help me. I learned through FSA and NRCS in trying to do the right thing for the land. I've been with my mother a couple times to the Women, Land and Legacy<sup>9</sup> meetings, because of the farmland that she owns. And it's been so helpful that I knew that I could not do this alone.

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

For many of the women, this was the first time they had engaged in discussion about the specifics of different conservation programs for which their land might be eligible. As one woman expressed, "You mentioned the acronyms. I have to stop to think – is this CRP<sup>10</sup> or CPR?" When a woman shared that she was having trouble getting the help she needed from her local NRCS office because she had signed over power of attorney to her tenant, a nephew, and the office staff would no longer speak to her about her land, the women and conservation staff at the meeting were quick to offer her solutions (Southern Iowa Learning Circle).

Some women went even further to call into question the power relationships involved in land management and to offer advice on pursuing different approaches. Describing how she

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<sup>8</sup> Annie's Project is a national educational program coordinated through national cooperative extension to serve agricultural women.

<sup>9</sup> Women, Land and Legacy is an outreach program for agricultural women started by state agencies and organizations and now is coordinated through WFAN.

<sup>10</sup> CRP is the acronym for the Conservation Reserve Program, an agricultural program federally funded through the Farm Bill.

conducts soil tests each year to ensure that her tenant—her son—returns the soil to its previous level of fertility, one woman shared:

So no matter how much we sell our land for, no matter how much rent we get, if they aren't doing the right thing to conserve the soil and put it back the way they found it in the sense of when you're renting your land out, have it soil tested, and if they are done renting, they need to bring it back up to that test. So who puts on the lime? The person who raped your ground. They took all the fertilizer, all the minerals from it – they need to put it back, not you, they. And that has to be in a contract to do that. So it's just some of those little bits and pieces that I've learned along the way.

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

The Learning Circle participants were enthusiastic about attending future meetings: 91% reported they were interested in attending a follow-up meeting with other women landowners in the area and 92% reported they would be interested in attending a Field Day with other women landowners to visit conservation projects on a woman-owned farm, suggesting that they felt comfortable in the women-only setting and were interested in the discussion about farmland ownership and management.

Sharing similar experiences with gendered narratives related to land management showed solidarity and built trust among landowner participants and between the landowners and conservation staff. Some of the participants tied the women conservation professionals' experiences to institutional changes in agricultural land management services:

Landowner:	Can I ask a question? Has there been a change in NRCS? I mean, are there more women behind the desk now or...?
NRCS staff:	Oh, from when I started? Far more women, yes. When I started, I was among a few.
Landowner:	Yeah, I'm thinking I've noticed this over my years of farming. And to me when I used to go in a long time ago, I wasn't paid much attention to by the men, and I think that's changing, now that you women are so many, that it's a more friendly atmosphere.
NRCS staff:	Oh, yeah. When I first started, they would come in, the producers would come in, and, "Can I talk to one of the guys?" Well, I'm one of the guys. So since then I have a bunch of good owners and producers in the county. So, yeah, I was one of few then. There was a lot more women in NRCS now.
Landowner:	Yeah, it's a good thing.

Northwest Iowa Learning Circle

The women conservation professionals who attended the meetings were empathetic with the women farmland owners. Many of them had also faced gender challenges in the pursuit of their interests to work in conservation:

And so when I was a senior and I decided what I wanted to go into, my high school counselor, when I said I wanted to go into agriculture, I wanted to go into forestry, I wanted to go into something, he looks at me and he says, "What do you mean? Those are men's jobs. There's just nothing. Don't you want to be a secretary?" and I said, "No."

And so I thought, okay, I graduated from high school and I still didn't have anything what I wanted to do. So I thought, okay, I can fix hair, so I went out and the first year I went into cosmetology. And then I slowly just kept doing things outside the box and finally got into natural resources when I was 50 years old. And so that's... I have three and a half acres back home full of trees, and it's a draw with water running through it (when it rains). So eventually someday I'll go back to [name of town] as my home base, and then I can work with women back home and travel.

Northwest Iowa Learning Circle

At a Field Day, two agency staff pulled me aside and commented that they had come to the meetings expecting to be resources to the farmland owners and were surprised to realize how much they got out of the meetings themselves. They explained they are often the only women in their offices or at farm programs, and it was rare for them to be together with other women in their work. They had not realized how they, too, were often isolated.

At the conclusion of another meeting, a conservation staff professional said to me that she was thankful WFAN organized such meetings with women farmland owners because her agency would "get in trouble" if they were to coordinate such meetings. She implied that farm organizations that commonly subscribe to dominant agricultural narratives of productivity and profit maximization, such as the Farm Bureau, would be upset that women landowners were being organized in such a way that they might act as a collective to make landscape level changes. Such coordination would challenge the dominant narrative of agriculture by shifting the organizational boundaries about who is or is not served by her agency. That homosocial spaces

for women focused on land management would be seen as subversive is testament to the institutionalization of gendered agricultural narratives. One participant shared a similar sentiment, that the meetings were something subversive within her family's land management situation. This woman made special mention in her introduction that her spouse and family did not know she was attending the meeting that day, and that she would like to keep it that way—no photos, please. She signed a consent form, but did not sign in on the sign-in ledger. She shared that she shared an email with her husband and did not want him to know that she was at the meeting that day.

At the Learning Circles and Field Days, women began to co-create different narratives: narratives in which women are active decision-makers on the landscape, shifting symbolic codes of land management. Loseke (1992:110) found that the homosocial spaces of domestic violence support groups instructed women to tell a particular type of story about their experiences with violence. At the Learning Circles and Field Days, women similarly were instructed by the facilitator and one another to share a specific story about their farmland--a personal story about their history with their farmland—and this story quickly revolved into a resistance story:

I am a stubborn person, and this is what I'm going to do. So I am going to farm. I am going to stay there. I'm planning to live to be 104 or whatever. We have longevity in the family. I'm going to make it; I know that I will. But I cannot do it alone, and that's why these meetings are so important to me, because I know that there are programs out there to help us, but I need to know what they are. And I need to know how to get the help that I need. And this is grassroots stuff – we can do this.

Northeastern IA Learning Circle

The desire to transform the current landscape was expressed through the women's new or alternative visions of their land:

I don't call it mine, because all I do is pay the taxes on it – you cannot own land. You can have your name on it. You can have the big, thick abstract that goes clear back to when the United States deeded it over, too. But all you do is take care of it. [...] having land offers our families for generations to come an anchor – because if you take care of that land, that land will take care of you.

Southern IA Learning Circle

These women may use their shared or expanded understanding of one another's experiences to question their narratives and, in turn, influence the revision of institutional and cultural narratives (Loseke 2007:676). Visions of new narratives were shared by women through their optimism about change in Iowa:

I am very interested in conservation practices, and I'm just thrilled to be in company of women who are working the land. And it's my belief that the women are beginning to change many facets of our world culture, and I think that why not start in Iowa.

Central IA Learning Circle

A landowner at the Northeastern IA Learning Circle, after hearing the stories of her neighbors, shared: "So we love this land, and we want to take care of this land, so we need to do whatever we can to do that. And that's something that I truly believe in." The creation of space for these women to share their stories and experiences, providing needed information and validation for one another, may be an important step to shifting power on the landscape

Though the local NRCS county offices had sent landowners in the county letters, most women attended because a neighbor, family member, friend or the NRCS staff member had personally called them to invite them to the meeting. This is important to note as it supports Everett's (1983) reminder that "women need to be invited," echoed in findings by Wells and Eells (2011). That women continue to need to be invited may say something more about cultural narratives and their exclusion of women than about women's lack of information or interest in



land management. The participants in this study were interested in learning more about conservation on their land. Some did share they attended just to have “coffee and conversation.” Regardless of their interest not being primarily focused on questions related to land management or conservation, even these women attending just for the “coffee and conversation” were there for the community, an important reminder of the lack of other community spaces in which they feel welcome.

### **Conclusion**

Despite women owning or co-owning approximately half of Iowa’s farmland, this study found that women face considerable challenges in implementing changes on their farmland and are constrained by existing gendered cultural narratives reinforced at local levels through social interactions with their family, neighbors, community members, and agricultural advisors. I focused specifically on women farmland owners rather than farmer-operators in effort to better understand the relationship between micro-level social interactions in land management and the maintenance of gendered cultural narratives of power and land. My data were collected from meetings targeting women farmland owners and my findings suggest that even when interest and capacity are present, social control processes experienced through daily interactions with their tenants, co-owners, agricultural advisors, and others work to maintain cultural narratives about land use and decision-making, thus limiting social action.

The landscape is controlled by both symbolic discourse and cultural narrative and material control of land management practices. Findings by Schwalbe et al. (2000) emphasize the iterative relationship between interactions as standard practice and the continuance of narrative control: “When a form of discourse is established as standard practice, it becomes a powerful tool for reproducing inequality, because it can serve not only to regulate thought and

emotion, but also to identify Others and thus to maintain boundaries as well” (435). This regulation of narrative explains how social interactions perpetuate the consistency of symbols and definitions to maintain gendered narratives and, ultimately, the dominant agricultural landscape. This study’s findings did not identify any disadvantage to the women’s use of homosocial spaces to seek information, as identified by Leckie (1996); instead, this study’s findings support Trauger’s (2004) findings that women-only spaces are important because they legitimize both the women’s identities and offer “public representation and resistance to traditional constructions of farm women femininity” (p. 301).

Understanding women’s experiences of the interactional processes maintaining these gendered narratives may help to identify opportunities for revision, intervention, and change in our cultural narratives about agricultural land and its management. Landscapes, as social constructions, shift and change as power relationships evolve (Greider and Garkovich 1994, Saugeres 2002). It is not destined that women defer decisions to their tenants, though it may work best for them at some or all points of their lives depending upon their capacity and interest. In addition to how they might be presented through the media, through agricultural policy, or other means, these narratives are sustained through social actions experienced in women’s daily lives. My analysis suggests that intervention or outreach efforts to better reach or engage women farmland owners are not alone enough to confer power. Controlling actions on the parts of co-owners, family, or advisors influence women’s actions to the point of constraint. In this way, social control acts on both the material and ideological levels.

Together, othering and boundary maintenance marginalize women farmland owners through exclusion to maintain a specific type of landscape, one that promotes a capital- and resource-intensive model of agriculture. These processes are, as Schwalbe et al. (2000) contend,

both “essential and generative” (441) and help us account for the continued dominance of commodity-driven agricultural narratives in the United States and elsewhere as we export this model through our foreign policy and foreign aid programs. My analysis of these processes identifies the importance of cultural narratives in women farmland owners’ experiences, and the need for more research studying the reflexivity between individual experiences and construction of the dominant narrative. Future studies may ask if, given that women are a growing demographic of farmers and that women farmland owners are (finally) beginning to gain the attention of researchers and agricultural institutions, whether this increased visibility of women in agriculture may inspire even greater enforcement of the gendered narratives in an effort to maintain patriarchal control of the land as the site of agricultural production. Further study might examine if social control increases as men become increasingly dependent upon women landowners as competition for land increases, and the growth of agriculture in small/diversified sector and among women, to maintain their identities as power holders. Beyond this focus, this paper offers insight into how processes of inequality emerge and are re-enforced through constructions of narrative identity and landscape, furthering inequality within the capitalist agri-food system.

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## **CHAPTER THREE: PLACEHOLDERS AND PLACEMAKING: THE PLACE OF WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS**

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Keywords: placeholder, narratives, agriculture, women

**ABSTRACT:** Formula stories work to maintain cultural narratives and, in agriculture, these stories are central to the maintenance of land tenure systems that concentrate land and power in the hands of men. This paper draws upon qualitative data to analyze the place of women farmland owners in agricultural narratives. My research supports previous findings that women are expected to defer decision-making to men to preserve the farmland for next generation. Further, I find that women are expected to occupy the position of “placeholder” within cultural narratives to ensure the success of the formula story and sustain the continuation of current land tenure systems. I identify two expectations placeholders are assumed to enact in the management of their farmland, as well as two ways women engage in placemaking to actively resist these expectations. Finally, I analyze the importance of networks for landowners engaged in placemaking. How women farmland owners inhabit or challenge the expectations of the “placeholder” within the formula story of USA agriculture offers insight into constructions of power and the maintenance of gendered social order, as well as ways to intervene in the circulation of symbolic codes constructing formula stories at institutional and cultural levels.

### **Introduction**

Cultural narratives offer important frameworks for understanding how individuals construct meaning in their lives and in relation to others. Stories, while personal, are embedded in social institutions and structures (Smith 2003). The story of land as a means to concentrate white, male power from one generation to the next is an old one in the USA history, and one that continues to shape what is possible in farmland management today. This paper examines the place of women farmland owners in Iowa within cultural narratives about farmland in the USA and identifies ways women fulfill or resist the expectations of these narratives.

Recent research suggests that even as women own approximately half of the nation's farmland (Duffy, Smith, Reutzel, Johnson 2008), historical power relationships privileging male control of land have not changed (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011, Pilgeram and Amos 2015, Wells and Eells 2011). In their survey of landowners in the USA Great Lakes Basin, Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt (2011) report that when it comes to decisions about farmland, "[f]emale landlords appear to have the least power due to their relationship with their tenant, their relationships with their siblings, or a combination of these situations" (p. 558). Sachs (1983) found that women in agriculture are invisible because their contributions and status are defined always through their relationships to men in their family or community. Pilgeram and Amos's (2015) recent study of women's land acquisition suggests that for women landowners, this invisibility persists: "despite the increasing numbers of women in farming, for many women access to land is directly tied to a male partner" (p. 17).

Marginalization of women farmland owners is also institutionalized within research. Women farmland owners have been overlooked in the study of agriculture (Eells and Soulis 2014, Effland, Rogers, and Grim 1993). As Allen and Sachs (1993) pointed out, and Pilgeram and Amos (2015) more recently reminded us, "gender analysis remains on the margins of the sociology of agriculture" (p. 4). The absence or lack of differentiation of women landowners in research means that we know little about their interests and values and suggests that often the interests and values of their male counterparts are standing in as the default (Eells and Soulis 2014). To the limited body of work, I contribute this analysis of women farmland owners' pivotal position within this gendered landscape.

## **Women Farmland Owners and Land Tenure in the USA**

Land tenure is the system by which land is purchased, transferred, and sold in accordance with cultural norms and environmental constraints (Salamon 1992:201-202). Historically, the social order of farming communities reinforced gender and racial divisions that perpetuated and concentrated power among white men (see Chang 2010, Faragher 1986, Fink 1986, Neth 1995, and Rosengarten 2000). The continuance of patriarchal control of farmland continues to shape identity and narratives today. Numerous studies have found that legal farmland ownership does not translate to social ownership and control for women because of patriarchal social orders (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011 in USA Great Lakes basin, Salamon 1992 in Illinois, Saugeres 1995 in France, Whatmore 1991 in England). The work of Sachs (1983), Fink (1986), and Neth (1995) details how the marginalization of women in agriculture coincides with the industrialization of the farm and increased land commoditization. The social structure of agriculture is not merely something transferred from previous systems, or naturally emergent, but a closely regulated maintenance of patriarchal power through systems of land tenure.

Historically, women in the USA were excluded from land ownership, as land was transferred between generations of male family members (Faragher 1988, Sachs 1983) and was controlled by fathers who determined its use and its future distribution to their sons; if daughters inherited land, it was only because there were no living sons and women's land became their husband's property once they married (Sachs 1983:12). Widows did not have legal control over their deceased husband's land until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sachs 1983). When women did inherit the land, they were obligated as widows to manage the land only until their children were legally responsible to do so (Faragher 1988). This discrimination has been conveyed through expectations within families and communities, but also institutionalized: until changes in USA

inheritance taxes in 1981, women were not recognized as legal co-owners of farm operations upon the death of their husbands (Sachs 1983). Using Hartmann's (1976) definition of patriarchy as "a set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchical relations between men, and solidarity among them, which enable them to control women" (p. 138)" to frame her analysis, Fink's (1986) ethnography of agricultural women in Iowa found women's land access to land was primarily via men through either marriage or inheritance, thus perpetuating patriarchal systems of land tenure. Salamon's (1992) study of farmland ownership in Illinois found similar patterns of farmland transfer maintaining patriarchy within families and communities, recreating cultural systems of power for subsequent generations. These historical gendered expectations of who controls a farm's use and future may no longer be legally sanctioned, but they continue to circulate within our cultural narratives and continue to influence women farmland owners' decision-making and action.

Today, approximately 47 percent of Iowa's farmland is owned or co-owned by women, consistent with national trends in land ownership (Duffy et al. 2008). Brasier et al. (2014) suggest that life transitions are important to understanding women's farmland management and census data of Iowa landowners suggests the same (Duffy and Johanns 2012). As women farmland owners outlive their spouses, co-owners become sole owners and may have opportunities to implement changes to their farmland that were previously complicated by the wishes of co-owners. Studies by Brasier et. al. (2014) and Pilgeram and Amos (2015) support earlier research by Sachs (1983) and Salamon and Keim (1979) in identifying widowhood as a time of life in which women have more or the most power in regards to their farms because they are no longer dependent upon male partners for decision-making. Yet, we know that women farmland owners are more dependent upon their farm rental income than men (Duffy and

Johanns 2012), and so as sole owners, women at later stages in life may be more dependent upon their tenants. Iowa has one of the highest proportions of rented farmland in the United States: 50 percent or more of Iowa's farmland is currently owned by someone other than the operator and leased to an operator-tenant (USDA NASS 2012). Studying how women experience structural and interactional constraints as they navigate their position within cultural narratives about land may help to identify ways these narratives maintain gendered social order on the landscape.

### **Formula Stories in Agriculture**

Loseke's (2007) theory of narrative construction, rooted in Berger and Luckmann's ([1966] 1967) theory of social construction, explains how meaning-making works at multiple levels to reinforce dominant and hegemonic cultural narratives. A formula story is a cultural narrative constructed through socially circulating symbolic codes that are institutionalized whether or not they fit the life realities of those they illustrate (Loseke 2007). As certain cultural stories are embedded and institutionalized, they come to be expected (Hopper 2001). Individuals may experience real or perceived pressure to tell a "correct" story fitting these expectations in order to receive services, be acknowledged, or be valued (Loseke 1992). Symbolic codes within cultural narratives portray expectations, rights, responsibilities, and norms, and while these codes are widely shared, they are not universal and so individuals must evaluate and at times recreate and re-interpret them through sensemaking (Loseke 2007:666). Just as Hopper (2001) found those going through divorces to be expected to present a specific moral self throughout the legal process of the divorce, women landowners may be expected by those in their community, or in agricultural organizations or institutions, to present a specific self through deference to tenants or male family members or may be seen as deviant if they do not.

Smith (2003) explains that narratives have common elements—characters who are subjects or objects of action, structured sequences, and a point (p. 65). Narratives of the dominant modes of agriculture in the USA privilege intensification, short-term profit, and maximization of production (Trauger 2001). A central character within the cultural narrative of productivist agriculture is the “Good Farmer” who both “feeds the world” and acts as a steward of the land. The “Good Farmer” balances efficiency and production while remaining a community-oriented citizen (McGuire, Cast, and Morton 2012). Burton’s (2004) study identified four characteristics of the “Good Farmer”: his farm appears physically clean/neat, his farm is profitable, his farm fits expected use within his community, and his farm is part of a family farm legacy within the community. This formula story maintains gendered divisions on the landscape: “[E]ven women who are from a farming background or who have inherited farms are not considered on the same terms as farmers. This is because in these farmers’ discourses only men are legitimate farmers” (Saugeres 2002:380). Institutional narratives maintain this formula story by prioritizing The “Good Farmer” in policy-making, research, and services<sup>11</sup>. In cultural narratives about farmland in the USA, the “Good Farmer” maintains land tenure systems through his legitimacy as the decision-maker and controller of agricultural land.

Salamon and Keim (1979) asked why farm women would continue to subordinate themselves to men in the management of their farmland even when women held the legal title to

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<sup>11</sup> In 2010, the United States Department of Agriculture settled discrimination claims with African American and Native American farmers and resolved claims of discrimination with Hispanic and women farmers. See

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/az/about/outreach/>

the land. They found that women, even if marginalized, understood their land ownership to be an important dimension of their identity and their power in the community (Salamon and Keim 1979). Sachs (1983) draws upon Gramsci's definition of hegemony to describe this situation: "Through hegemonic process, which Gramsci describes, men are able to maintain their positions of power. Force or direct forms of domination may not be necessary. Thus, to the women on farms, it appears "natural" that men are farmers and women are helpers. Women, in fact, often "consent" to their own exploitation" (p. 109). This relationship continues today with the increased competitiveness of farming and consolidation of farmland, and the longevity of women's lives as they outlive their co-owner partners.

Women play an important role in the processes of masculinity construction (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The place of women in the formula story is important to the construction of the "Good Farmer's" masculinity and the perpetuation of productivist agricultural narratives. In her study of a French agricultural community, Saugeres (2002) found "men constructed their masculine identities through the appropriation of the farming landscape, an appropriation they reproduce through discourse and practice, women construct their identities as marginalized others whose relationship to farming is defined in relation to their husbands" (p. 381). Examining how women negotiate and challenge their position within the formula story may help to better understand how to identify opportunities for intervention or change within capitalist, agricultural narratives.

Women challenge cultural expectations about who is in control of agricultural landscapes when the management of their land is not tied to a male partner, or when their land management differs from the status quo (Saugeres 2002), yet we know little about how women in agriculture view their land or their relationships with their tenants and family in its management (Trauger



2001, Wells and Eells 2011). Recent quantitative research by Druschke and Secchi (2014) emphasizes the importance of studying women farmland owners and work by Brasier et. al. (2014) stresses the need for this to include multiple stages of life in order to better understand how their social power with co-owners and / or tenants evolves or changes depending upon their life situation. To address these suggestions and needs, I ask: (1) What is the place of the woman farmland owner within gendered cultural narratives of farmland use and tenure? (2) What are the symbolic codes comprising the expected status of women farmland owners within this narrative? and (3) How do women landowners negotiate their legitimacy in relation to their position in this narrative?

### **Methods**

I collected qualitative data for this paper in three stages: a series of five Learning Circles held in the fall of 2012, five Field Days held in summer of 2013, and twenty-six in-depth interviews conducted during December 2014-March 2015. This paper focuses primarily upon the interview data, but the analysis of the Learning Circles and Field Day data informed both the content of the interview questions and the recruitment specific categories of farmland owners for the interviews. The Iowa State University Institutional Review Board reviewed all forms, procedures and data collection activities (IRB #12-367 and IRB #14-527). Participants all reviewed and signed consent forms.

Learning Circles and Field Days were hosted by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) and promoted meetings for women farmland owners interested in learning more about conservation on their farm. WFAN is a non-profit organization based in Iowa with a mission to serve women in sustainable agriculture. It is also currently the only organization in the state providing women-only land management outreach to agricultural women through their

Women Caring for the Land Program<sup>SM</sup> (WCL), and so was an obvious partner. Despite WFAN's ecofeminist roots (Wells 1998), participants in WCL have primarily been women involved in conventional agriculture focusing on commodity crop production (Adcock 2014), reflecting the dominant land use in Iowa. Participants reflected statewide women landowner demographics in that they were older (65 years and older) and many were widows (Duffy and Johanns 2012). Beyond this correspondence, no further claim of representativeness is made.

I used theoretical sampling to recruit women farmland owners for the twenty-six interviews to reflect diversity of land acquisition, age, and type of ownership. All participants owned Iowa farmland. Data analysis from the 2012-2013 Learning Circles and Field Days, and review of the literature on women farmland owners (Eells 2008, Petrzela, Buman, and Ridgely 2009, Petrzela and Marquart-Pyatt 2011) informed the creation of different categories of women farmland owners to structure recruitment of interview participants (Table 6). In-depth personal interviews were semi-structured and conducted with an interview guide allowing for emergent questions (Hesse-Biber 2007) and based upon analysis from the earlier stages of data collection (Appendix A). All interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim for qualitative analysis using Nvivo 10 software.

I included non-resident landowners as a category in my sampling because, as suggested by Petrzela and Marquart-Pyatt (2011), the relationship between non-resident women landowners and their tenants in relation to conservation implementation raises important yet unanswered questions in understanding social relationships of land management (p. 559). In interviewing women within categories, I identified negative cases, or those whose status or situation contrasted with these patterns (Charmaz 2014:198) and found that many participants occupied more than one category. For example, a widowed farmland owner who also owns

farmland with siblings that they inherited from family, or a woman who would soon or had recently occupied other categories (perhaps having bought out a sibling's share in formerly co-owned farmland, or who knows she would soon inherit land from parents).

**Table 6 Categories of Interview Participants**

<b>Landowner Category</b>	<b>N=26</b>
<i>Land Ownership</i>	
sole owner	8
co-owner with siblings	10
co-owner with spouse	8
co-owner with parent	2
<i>Landowner status</i>	
non-operator landowner	19
active farmer/farm partner	5
<i>Marriage status</i>	
married/partnered	16
widow	4
<i>Distance from land</i>	
in-state landowner	20
out-of-state landowner	6
<i>Land acquisition</i>	
purchased farmland	12
inherited farmland	17

My data analysis may extend from individual to structural levels because my data collection is theoretically grounded (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). I analyzed the data using a constructivist approach to grounded theory that studies both “*how*--and sometimes *why*-- participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations” (Charmaz 2014:239). Grounded theory “is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively grounded theory about a phenomenon,” both generating and testing concepts and relationships among concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1990:24). I constructed codes through line-by-line coding of transcripts and participant observation notes. Throughout this process, I wrote analytic memos that guided my analysis and subsequent data collection. This data analysis was further refined for credibility and reliability through my participation in a grounded theory seminar during 2013-2015. Together, we engaged in collaborative open coding of the data that was then refined through axial coding in theoretical memos that were discussed in the seminar. Throughout my analysis, I was careful to use verbatim words or phrases as described in the process of narrative analysis in order to not inject interpretation into the analysis (Loseke 2012). During a meeting of the grounded theory seminar, we realized that the category “placeholder” was useful for conceptualizing the place of women landowner in cultural narratives and the way the formula story was institutionalized in farming communities of which these women were members.

One constraint to this study related to the importance of alternative networks is the lack of an existing list of landowners and limited historical engagement with women farmland owners specifically. Federal farm agencies maintain lists of farmers who receive federal program payments, for example, but these recipients may not all be landowners. County records of agricultural landowners are often out-of-date or include information for corporations or trusts,

rather than individuals. A final and related constraint is the limited diversity in this demographic. While I recruited interview participants broadly through existing agricultural organizations and networks, my participant sample was comprised entirely of participants who would identify racially as white, as would be expected given the historical settlement of Iowa and historical use of land as a means to perpetuate white, male power, and the institutional racism and sexism of institutionalized agricultural programs<sup>12</sup>. Still, Iowa does have non-white landowners, though their percentage is not known. Hannah Lewis (2007) found it difficult to identify and then recruit Latino farmers through official channels such as ISU Extension or the USDA. Her four study respondents—all men—were found through connections she had with another research project focusing on markets for small-scale meat production. The challenges in recruiting non-white and/or women farmland owners are inherent in studying these demographics.

### **Placeholders and Placemaking: Negotiating a Gendered Landscape**

My analysis identifies a pivotal person within the formula story without whom the success of the formula story is in jeopardy: the *placeholder*. Cultural narratives of land ownership influence community expectations that all women farmland owners are supposed to be placeholders: women landowners own land that earlier had belonged to or was managed by men, and it is expected that men will control its management again. Women, depending upon

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<sup>12</sup> See the *Seagull vs. USDA*, *Love vs. Vilsack*, etc. cases in which the USDA paid out settlements to Native American, African American, Latino/a, and women farmers as compensation for discrimination in farm service programs and loans.

their interest, capacity, and situation may decide to enact these expectations or resist these expectations.

In the following discussion, I first analyze the placeholder as a social position in the formula story and social structure before explaining two of its expectations. Following this discussion of placeholders, I will discuss two ways women farmland owners engage in *placemaking* in attempt to resist the formula story's expectations of their land management. Finally, I will theorize about the role of alternative networks upon women farmland owners' placemaking, as well as the influence of these networks upon potential narrative shifts or change.

### **Women as Placeholders: Maintaining a Gendered Landscape**

As placeholders, women are expected to maintain the success of the farm for future generations by deferring their power as landowners to male co-owners, tenants, or advisors. Successfully fulfilling the expectations of the placeholder permit the landowner to avoid social conflicts in the family and the community by complying with gendered expectations about land use and decision-making, and may operate as a default for many women who know of limited or no other options for engagement. The expectations of the placeholder remain strong and largely unchanged despite women's near parity in land ownership and legal power today.

In this study, I identified two ways that the community places expectations upon women in the placeholder position. The first is that women landowners *maintain* the land—continuing its use for agricultural production and maintaining existing land agreements with tenants and co-owners—with the goal of having the farm remaining profitable and viable so it can be passed on to the next generation. The exception to this first expectation would be that women landowners may make changes to their land when done in deference to a man. This is the second expectation:

although women have legal authority to make decisions, they are expected to *defer* to decisions by men and accept the intervention of men. I discuss each in the following section.

### **Maintenance of Existing Arrangements**

As placeholders, women farmland owners are expected to maintain the farmland for future generations, and ensure its continued profitability by using the land for agricultural production. The farmland inherited by many women comes with inherited land use (how the land has been used previously) and often with inherited tenants (those to whom the previous decision-maker had rented out the farm). Women were typically expected to continue the current use of the farmland and to lease it to the same tenant, or the same family, as had been done previously by the past decision-maker or generation.

Jenny, an out-of-state landowner in her 50s, inherited her family's century farm along with her brother, cousins, aunts and uncles. Their farm tenant is a good friend to her parents, and she described their relationship this way: "I think that we would possibly continue renting to him as long as he wants to farm it. I can't imagine there being any change. I don't think we would say no to him. He's always been a good tenant." She felt dependent upon the tenant because without him, she said, she didn't know what they would do or how they would find a new one because she had few remaining connections in the area. She was similarly dependent upon her uncle, who managed the relationship with the tenant and who was her source of information about the farm. Her uncle often sent her information about conservation and alternative crops that he knew she would be interested in, but she kept existing arrangements in place because "it's never simple with that many people owning a farm" (Jenny). When asked about her future vision for her farm, she shared:

I sometimes have the desire to take my 20 acres and make it my own little farm and do what I want to do with that little piece of property, which would be very different from anything that anybody, the way anybody farms in that area. The way that I would do it would be completely different, because I'm so into local food and organic food and small-scale sustainable farming. So my ideas are very different from what has happened, but I think that probably what I want to do will probably never happen there, so I try not to worry about it too much.

When asked why she thought it would never happen, she said that it would be hard “to carve out something different” within a system that prioritizes row crops and when all the neighbors have ideas about farming a certain way. She did share that she and her brother talked about forming a limited liability corporation (LLC) with their co-owner cousins in the future, and maybe starting a wind farm, and so perhaps once ownership shifts within her family she will be able to act on her future vision.

In keeping with the symbolic codes of the “Good Farmer” formula story, the visual appearance of a farm served as an indicator to the larger community about the continuation of its upkeep. Bridget, a woman in her 40s, explained how she and her brother (her tenant) decided together to maintain an existing fence even though they did not graze livestock anymore and was no longer needed on their farm:

Well, most of it is for the looks. And that's the thing—you know, you take it all out or you make it look nice, and I think that's really where our decision was: let's just make it look nicer. Taking it out is a lot of work, and it does provide a barrier, which is, there's positives for that—the curb appeal, if you will. I mean, that's something that's important to our family, and I support that.

The “curb appeal” signals “good farming,” which is important to her family to maintain expectations and their reputation as a good farming family in the community.

## **Deference**

The placeholder is expected to defer decisions or actions to others not because she is uninterested, but because she trusts her tenant or co-owners to act on her behalf, and they, in turn,



communicate with her when she needs to know something or her input is needed for a decision. Further, she is expected to welcome the intervention of men in the management of her farmland.

Paula, a woman in her 70s, co-owns several farms in various arrangements with her mother, brother, spouse, and sister-in-law. Her brother farms all the farms. One of the farms was her family's original home place and had been in the family for over 150 years and she hopes it will stay in the family. When asked how she communicates with her brother about decisions related to the farms, she explained that they communicated often:

[My brother] always says what's going on or tells us, but we don't have regular family meetings. What it boils down to is that, when the family gets together, whether it be for a holiday or birthday, it's discussed if something is brewing or he needs to take action on it, he'll either stop in or we talk about it when all the family is together.

She remembered that as children her parents told them that they were in this together, and to always stick together, and that she and her brother had always had a good relationship together because that stuck with them very early:

"Your mom and I are not going to be around forever. It's up to the two of you to stick together and work together and make things go together, because in this world you will only have each other until you build your families. But you still will have each other, and you've got to learn to work together." And I can remember that. I mean, I wasn't very old, but I can remember that.

While she decided things about the farm in partnership with her brother, she described very clearly the gendered aspects of farmland ownership:

[M]aybe [it's] the one disadvantage of being female. I can't go down to the..., or I feel like I can't go down to the elevator and brush shoulders with the other farmers, because I'm not out there in the field. I mean, as a woman there are still restrictions, even though we are equal more or less. But there still are some restrictions that a woman doesn't do. And to go down and visit down in the elevator, that's just something I don't think I guess I feel a woman can do.

Consistent with findings by Saugeres (2005) that men are assumed to embody a natural ability to farm, this landowner explains how her brother--as the man, the farmer, and the one “out there in the field”--can enter spaces that she, as a landowner and a woman, cannot even though she owns the farmland with her brother and decides things together in partnership with him. A placeholder is not supposed to need to enter such gendered spaces because she is assumed to have someone—as Paula has her brother—to access information within this spaces as needed for the management of her or their farmland.

Women of different generations used deference as a way to negotiate their relationship with their tenants and co-owners. Bridget, a woman in her 40s, had recently bought some farmland with her brother near where they grew up with the hope that she could “keep it in the family” and leave something “positive for future generations.” When asked how she and her brother split their ownership, she explained:

So neither one of us could afford to buy the whole piece, so we went ahead and split it. And so I own 27½ acres in [Name of] County, and my brother farms it, and, well, my dad [does too], I guess. But my brother is the one who does most of the decision-making as far as what to plant and how to do it, when to do it. I’ve been very passive in most of this. I’m interested in getting more involved, but up to this point my brother has been, “Is this okay if we do this?” “Uh-huh, sure.” That’s my response. We usually consult a little bit. I mean, I’ve never said no, but, you know, I trust him, and half of it is his, too.

Her brother makes the decisions about tiling, seed, chemicals, and insurance: “Then he, bless his heart, stays on top of my crop insurance for me too. He deals with that and I just pay.” When asked to explain more about her relationship with her co-owner brother, she said:

I think a lot of it has been that I’ve been so far removed that I just said, “You deal with it, and I’ll make my payments.” You know, I’ll pay the taxes, and I’ll make my meeting payments, and I’ll pay you when you tell me to, but you’re making the day-to-day decisions. And he’s been fine with that. That’s what he does. That’s what he likes to do. We get along very well. I don’t have any reason to worry that he would do anything that wouldn’t be in my best benefit or my best interest.

Like Paula, Bridget relies upon her brother's knowledge when it comes to making decisions about the farmland. In support of Brasier et al.'s (2014) findings that women's identities in relationship to their land shift as their life situations change, Bridget explained that she foresaw being more involved in her farmland's management in the near future. She had recently moved closer to the farmland and was eager to engage more with its management once her family had settled after their move: "Well, I definitely would like to be more involved. I think I have lots to learn as far as the output, the grain marketing. I still have a lot to learn on how to do that, when to do that, what to watch. That piece is where I still have a lot of learning to do." Bridget added later that her father was very involved in different agriculture groups, and she hoped to engage more in those, too, though she indicated she needed to find her own path: "I need to find my own interests and my own groups. Can't piggyback on him forever." As she becomes more engaged in her land's management, she may challenge the expectations of the placeholder to defer decisions.

Placeholders are not passive—they are expected to make needed changes on their farmland but to do so in ways that maintain existing power structures. Joan shared that when her mother died, she and her sisters inherited their tenant along with the farmland. They renegotiated the contract with him because the rent was, she thought, too low. She said that her sisters "weren't happy with me at the time, but they never sent the money back either." When asked what the tenant thought of this change, she explained that she thought he understood—her mother had originally wanted to help him start out, and now he was doing better, so it made sense that with the value of farmland going up that he should pay more rent: "There were no problems. We came to an agreement." But, in respect to decisions about the management of the farm, she explained that they left it all to the tenant: "We're all stupid. I pretty much let [name of

tenant] run it, and I realize I probably should take a more active part in what's going on, but sometimes my son steps in and does some research if something comes up." Joan engaged to the extent that she created a fairer contract between the tenant and her and her sisters, however does not engage in day-to-day farmland management or decisions about the actual site of production.

At the Learning Circles, landowners shared stories about how, in the absence of a male co-owner or spouse, men may compete for future tenancy or purchase of her land by "helping" her—shoveling her drive, taking her to doctor appointments, including her in their family life—with the expectation that they will have priority for future purchase of the land. In some cases this was welcome; in others it was not and these men were referred to as "vultures." The following example from an interview shows an extreme case. Because men are expected to control the land, their intervention is assumed to be needed, allowed, or welcomed when women are alone. As Claire shared, others may impose their control of her land without permission:

Once was when my dad was ill...he had heart and circulation problems before he died. I mean, that what he died of was a heart attack. When he first got sick he had a pulmonary embolism and ended up at [the hospital out of town] for a really long time. Mom was driving back and forth trying to keep the lawn mowed and feed the cats and still be in [at the hospital] with my dad and I think he was in the hospital over three weeks. [...] [D]uring the time that she was not around someone turned them in to the weed commission for having thistles in the ditch and not controlling them like my dad normally would do every year. He didn't spray because he was in the hospital and someone turned them in and they got fined. She's always been angry about that. She doesn't know for sure who it was but she thinks she does and she's still pissed about it. I don't blame her.

Claire implied that her mother would not have had this conflict had her husband been there and not been absent at the hospital. Since the husband/father figure was absent, it was okay to call the weed commissioner rather than contacting the wife or the daughter because it assumed that these women are just placeholders and do not have the knowledge or interest to manage needs of the land maintenance. This implies that the farm needs someone—a man—to control it and to maintain its appearance. Had she been a widow rather than a woman with an ill spouse, would

she have been granted more leniency? Research from Brasier et. al. (2014) and others (Pilgeram and Amos 2015, Sachs 1983, Salamon and Keim 1979) suggests that widows have the most autonomy in decision-making compared to married women; however, Claire reflected that situations are not easier for widows: I think a lot of older tenants ....they're used to the widows relying on them to manage the farm, giving them that control, and if someone comes and tries to take it back I think they would resist that.”

Women are expected to occupy the placeholder position in the formula story whether or not they maintain current agreements and/or defer decisions to tenants or others. Brenda, an out-of-state landowner explained, “It’s hard for people like us who, you know, kind of want to do the right thing or want to do, you know, want to do what’s right for the land. It’s not easy. There’s just not a lot of support out there. I mean, it’s difficult internally, but it’s also just not, it’s just not easy.” She shared her feeling of isolation because of her distance from the farm and her lack of experience in agriculture:

We don’t know the questions to ask. It’s not like there are a whole of people out there that we have contact with who are saying, “Well, I’ll, I’ll farm it this way,” and “I’ll farm it this way,” and “I’ll farm it that way.” And, and it’s also difficult because we have a relationship with [our tenant]—not a close relationship, but it’s a longstanding family relationship. And, I do trust him. You know, I, I trust him. He’s a good guy, he’s a solid guy. I know his family. And that, that’s valuable in the situation that we’re in. I think it’s very telling that your, that up until ten years ago, you know, my dad, my uncle and [the tenant] were farming this land on a handshake.

As placeholders, women are constrained not just by social relationships with their co-owners or influential others, but also by the realities of an agricultural system that privileges certain methods of production and certain types of farmers. Without alternative options presented to them, and assistance to implement these, placeholders resort to the default—what has been done before.

Placeholders are supposed to care for their farmland, be interested in its management, and take part in decision-making about its future; however, they fulfill current gendered expectations by maintaining current arrangements and deferring their legal authority and land management to men. Failure to enact placeholder expectations may cause confusion, as it challenges the gender binary of agricultural land management that is the norm in rural communities and is dominant in agricultural institutions and organizations, threatening the power of the “Good Farmer.”

### **Placemaking: Resisting a Gendered Landscape**

I use the term placemaking to name the processes women landowners used to resist gendered expectations of the social position of placeholder. A landowner may engage in placemaking as she navigates the complex social situations involved in owning farmland and/or as events change her relationship to her farmland (inheritance, widowhood, deaths of co-owners, purchase of farmland on her own). Eighteen of the 26 interview participants were currently engaging in placemaking; but, importantly, not all of them had always done so or originally intended to do so. They were doing what they thought as right for the land when the opportunity presented itself or when their life situation changed to allow them to buy land, be the sole decision maker, or they had the time to engage more in its management. Placemaking implicitly or explicitly challenges the placeholder expectations in two ways: 1) surreptitious compromise (waiting for someone to die, acquiring information and implementing change in secret) and 2) public actions (firing a tenant, altering the use of the farmland). Below, I discuss these methods of placemaking, followed by an analysis of the importance of alternative networks to placemaking.

## **Surreptitious Compromise**

Surreptitious compromise is a method of enacting change in a less confrontational way than public actions. Through surreptitious compromise, women farmland owners may succeed in making changes on the land, but perhaps have to compromise on the method or timeline of implementation. Conflict avoidance inspires this method of placemaking.

Implementing change in secret was one way that women compromised. Rose, an out-of-state landowner, reported that she had hired an attorney to help her set up a trust for her farmland and plans to donate it to charities she values rather than letting her sibling / tenant have first option to buy. This plan was a secret she kept from her family and she said they would all find out when she died: “I don’t feel like I need to deal with their reaction.” When pressed to explain more about what she meant about their reaction, she explained: “I think for some farmers, it’s kind of an arrogance or sense of entitlement. I think it’s more than that...it’s not all farmers, but I would say for some there is a sense of entitlement about farmland, and I don’t think that some farmers respect women as much as they should.” Her explanation highlights the expectation that placeholders should maintain existing land arrangements (she should continue to rent to her brother) and defer to others (she should not keep her land’s future plans secret).

Women also waited for someone to die—spouse, co-owner, influential family member—before implementing a major change in the farmland. These landowners had a specific plan of action they would implement once a co-owner or influential other died. Waiting for a family member to die was often an effort to avoid hurt feelings or conflict, an intent not always successful. Cathy, who owned farmland with her sisters, approached her uncle, who had been the farm manager for decades during their father’s life but had no legal authority over the farmland now, about a plan to donate farmland to a conservation land trust. The uncle thought this was an

inappropriate use of land because, he said, land in conservation would not help to feed the world. Having approached their uncle with this idea caused enough tension that their relationship was permanently strained; they might as well have implemented their original plan in the first place because they had so offended their uncle by sharing their idea:

It was a very emotional time. And so my sisters and I did not at that time have the stomach to go ahead; we just felt like it would be too destructive to the family relationships. My feeling was, well, quite frankly he's going to die before I do. I intend to live a long time, and when he's gone and not managing the farm, then we'll do whatever we want.

Even though the uncle had no legal authority over the land, his influence constrained the decisions the sisters wanted to make about the use of the farmland. He expected that they, as placeholders, would defer to his judgment. Rachel, another in-state landowner, had been discouraged by her parents from spending much time out at the farm when she was growing up because they saw it as primarily an investment, and it was not until her dad died that she was able to implement her vision: "So he passed away in 2005 at the age of 94, 95, and then I had full ownership of it, and then I could really rock and roll and do a lot more aggressive things with the farm in a positive way. When you say "aggressive," it sometimes has a negative connotation, but it can also be positive, too."

Not all landowners experienced social conflict in navigating constraints or challenges with co-owners. Some were able to bring their co-owners on board with increased attention to soil and water quality on their farms, but at a slower pace than they might have preferred, as Barbara shares:

We've just moved forward really, really slowly, really carefully.... slower than I would like (laughing) in terms of urgency, I feel, for the planet. Everything from global warming to water quality and all of those issues. But that's my, that's my concern and they're equally interested in making sure that the land is not only cared for, but isn't causing pollution. We've walked it more often now than we had in years past.



Barbara explained that she did small things—like pay the cost of her co-owners to attend agricultural conferences or take them with her to soil health lectures—in order for her co-owners to learn more about conservation and opportunities to improve their farm. Similarly, she worked at a slower pace than she might have liked with her tenant because, she explained their relationship was good but she was “mindful of the fact that he’s slightly older than I am so I think about how long he might, or might not, want to farm and how willing he may, or may not, be to adopt change.”

Claire’s situation combined both waiting for someone to die and enacting change at a slower pace than she would prefer. Her mother still lived on their farmland and recently her tenant had passed away. This had been a hardship for her because the tenant was a family friend who had been close to her deceased husband. She found a new and younger tenant who was interested in trying new things, such as cover crops, on the farm. Claire, the daughter, whom I interviewed, said that she was encouraged by this and after her mother passed on planned to work more closely with the tenant to create more changes on the farm. She did not want to impose in the relationship between her mother and the new tenant:

I’ve been willing to go behind my mom’s back in some ways to talk to her lawyer or accountant but her tenant...[...] I don’t want to interfere or start doing stuff without telling her [...] [I]t’s not at the point right now where I want to try to be the decision maker, but I want to get to be that person because at any moment she could pass away. I don’t want to completely walk in ignorance like a lot of the ladies are when they inherit. I’ve been trying to walk that line.

This landowner was refusing to comply with the expectation that she would continue with existing arrangements on the farm or defer its management to others. Rather, she was planning ahead and working closely with both local contacts and alternative networks to acquire needed skills and knowledge about the management of her family’s farm so that when she becomes sole owner of the farm, she is ready to engage more change on the farmland.

## Public Actions

Public actions describe methods of placemaking that are visible to the community, enforcing and maintaining new symbolic codes about land use and authority over the land. These actions often caused conflict for the women. When asked what the neighbors thought about her implementing a lot of conservation on her property after her father passed away, Rachel explained:

[T]hey can be a challenge, some of them, a real challenge. It might have to do with the way they like to farm or with the way they feel they have the right to farm versus those of us who think, well, this is how you should farm versus I have the right to farm. I think that's probably the dichotomy.

When asked for a specific example, she continued:

One of the farmers next to my farm ground decided he didn't like a thorn tree that was growing literally on the fence line but clearly was in my farm ground. And he is this one particular farmer that just plants crop right up to the fence line. And I had severe erosion from him a couple of years ago, and I put in a huge retaining wall to control it, because my wetland was filling up with his farm runoff of silt. But he just cut down a tree about like, I don't know, five months ago and pushed it over in my farmland. And I knew who it was, and I just, you know... I can be aggressive.

She explained that she had not followed up with him after that because "you have to be careful. I mean, you truly have to be careful" implying she felt that intimidation and threat were possibilities.

A woman attending a Learning Circle who insisted on maintaining a wetland on her property, and not draining it at the request of her tenant so that he could farm a few more acres, was ostracized by her family. Wetlands were not seen as an appropriate use of farmland when new farmers were struggling to compete and needed every acre in production to make a profit. The woman shared that she valued the wildlife that the wetland supported, and intended to do all she could to put those acres in a trust or something similar to ensure that it would always exist. Her family and community had ostracized her because of this decision. She shared she no longer

felt comfortable going to the church she had attended since childhood or to the local grocery store because the community pressure was so extreme. She shared though that “I’m very strong, and I’ve stood up” and she wasn’t going to give in to the “bullies” (Northeastern Iowa Learning Circle).

Bev resisted both expectations of the placeholder through public actions. She changed existing land use on farmland she inherited from her family and she publicly refused to defer to the farmland tenant whom her dad had entrusted with the land. She explained how this led to her being labeled as “crazy” by others in the area:

I have taken cropland out of production, which makes me look crazy. [...] You know, some people think that you should grow corn on every acre or soybeans on every acre, and here’s this crazy woman taking cropland out of production when they’re tearing up things and putting it into production. And what is she doing? And why? And why is she putting cover crops on and all those things over the years?

Bev had inherited her tenant when she inherited her family’s farmland; they entered into an agreement she thought was agreeable to them both—agreeing to limit use of pesticides. Bev later discovered that her tenant was not doing what they had agreed upon. When she confronted him, he told her “[Your dad] would never do that.” Bev replied, “You’re not dealing with [my dad]” and then said to me “It was *my* farm. And he hadn’t got that through his head yet, and that was the last year that he farmed for me.” This decision to stand up to her tenant had caused her to feel physically ill because, she explained, “I had my dad dead, standing over my shoulder, and I was firing *his* farmer.” Her siblings had also inherited this tenant on their inherited acres, but they continued to rent to him. In another situation involving the firing of a tenant, a participant at a Field Day in northwestern Iowa shared that she had fired her previous tenant “who was, in essence, raping the land” and hired a new tenant who would comply with her conservation requirements in her land lease. She said that she knew that people in the community were calling

her a “bitch” and did not think that she should have changed tenants, but she knew she had done the right thing. By firing their tenants, both landowners resisted the expectations of the placeholder by changing existing agreements on the land and refusing to defer to their tenant.

Elizabeth shared a similar story about the stress she felt in changing tenants on her farmland and going against the previous arrangement her father had established on the farmland before she had inherited it. For ten years after inheriting the land, she continued with the same tenant and the same crop share agreement before deciding to switch to cash rent. This angered her tenant. He took the lease but told her he was unsure if he would bring it back. She had agreed to rent some of her adjoining acres to a woman who was a beginning farmer, and who was going to transition these acres to organic. Because her first tenant took so long with the lease, Elizabeth entertained the idea of renting the rest of her acres to this new tenant. When the first tenant heard about this, he was angry and tried to return the lease he had taken months before (via Elizabeth’s brother, who had originally managed her farm for her). Elizabeth explained to her first tenant, “I said, ‘I’ve always believed in having more sustainable practices, and your delay in responding helped me realize the options I have, and this is an opportunity to do this.’” Her brother dealt with the first tenant’s further complaints so that she no longer had to interact with him:

But it took a long time before I wasn’t anxious about—well, what’s the repercussions going to be? And I know that summer at a summer celebration when I first saw him, like at the parade or whatever it was, I changed the side of the street. But then eventually I was going into the library, and he was standing inside the door. So I just reached out my hand to shake it. It was just a cordial thing, and he goes like, “Well, what’s this?” [refusing to shake her hand] And we’ve never spoken.

Placemaking did not always inspire such conflict. While Elizabeth experienced public consequence for refusing to give in to her tenant, she found acceptance within her family when she became a more active manager of her farmland. Initially, her brother had managed her

farmland, and she felt as if he and her father were not responsive to her questions. She accepted this as just how things had always been done until she was inspired to re-examine the situation.

Anyway, so there would be things that would just really frustrate me, and then I'd be reminded of male privilege, and so it just hit a deep complex. So my spiritual director this one time said, "Well, when are you going to start managing your own land?"

And I said, "That's not how we do it in our family." You know, the myth system that we had was that the men had to make the decisions. The men knew better. But shortly after that, I wrote a letter to my brother and my father, saying that someday I'd like to farm my own land, and how did they see that I should progress with that.

While Elizabeth was still clearly challenging expectations within her family and the community at large, her father, whom she had described as "a patriarch," realized that she was not unreasonable. She continues to rent to her new tenant, the woman who was transitioning the farmland to organic, and while the situation was unusual within her family (that a daughter would manage farmland) and unusual within the community (that she changed tenants to rent to a beginning, organic, woman farmer), she was able to continue with her management without further question from her family.

Some women were praised by their communities for engaging in public action that changed land use. Rachel, the farmland owner whose neighbor had cut down her thorn tree, shared:

But we've gotten a lot of respect, too, and I think one of the things that garners respect is when you take a piece of farm ground that nobody's lived on for 70 years and all of a sudden you make it habitable. You go in, you clean things up, and it's not like you want to destroy the environment.

Kristin, a recent widow whose land ownership had been contested by her stepchildren, found validation in land use changes from her neighbors and local soil and water district commissioner. Her farm had several areas subject to extreme erosion. To help hold and rebuild the soil, she planted stream buffers at her own expense—without help from government programs—and began planting only alfalfa. She shared that people in the community stopped her at the store to

comment on the noticeable difference between her farm and the farm across the road, where land was visibly eroding. She felt that this acknowledgement of her conservation efforts was helping to provide an example for her neighbors:

I mentioned earlier that, when I go to the John Deere store or I talk to people in the community, they can see the practices that I'm already employing out here that are so much better than right across the road. I know they look at my crop. I know that they do. I hear it from different people, that they'll tell me, you know, about my corn when I had corn or about my hay now. I am in a situation where I can make a huge impact if I embrace it, and I know that. So I need to take that opportunity and make a difference.

In both examples, it is notable that it is the men of the community who are gatekeepers who vet the changes the women have made. Still, they present shifts in the formula story that show that change in expectations of the placeholder, at least on an interactional level, are possible.

Only one of the women in my sample shared a story of eventual acceptance for her placemaking actions. Gina, who was originally from an urban area and moved to rural Iowa after having been part of the lesbian back to land movement, found that her neighbors recognized her methods of farming as familiar and so were more accepting of her. One neighbor remarked to her that she could hear this landowner's rooster in the morning:

And I said, "I'm sorry. Did they disturb you?" And she said, "No, I've got about, a bottle calf I gotta get up and feed early," and she said, "I like hearing him. It reminds me of how it used to sound. I haven't heard that in a long time" And so a lot of people around here—like I said, I've got some credit now and they're supportive now because I'm farming like they grew up knowing how farming was, even though they didn't do all that with ugly stuff with tarps and pallets like I do. But, no—they see that the animals are well taken care of, and they see that I know what I'm doing.

She knew that people in town had laughed at her for some of the things she did, such as requesting an on/off switch on the security light out at her farm so that she could sleep at night:

You know, every farm has that big yard light. [...] I said, "Falling asleep under a street light—I could have stayed in the city!" And people were like, "Oh, no, no. It gets really dark out there in the country. You'll really like having that, and then, you know, otherwise it's just too dark," and that and that. And I had an on/off switch put on it so that I didn't have to have it on if I didn't

want to have it on. And people just laughed. They was like, “Oh, she had an on/off switch put on that!” And, and, you know, nobody bothers me about it anymore, but that was one of the things they thought I was such a city girl. And I just said, “No. I want it to be dark at night. I want to be able to see the stars, and I want to be able to sleep in the dark.”

She recognized that she was an unusual person in the community:

But some of the guys around here, they treat me like one of the guys a little bit, and some of the women were kind of standoffish about me. Working [in town] has made a huge difference. I’ve been there three years now, so people have gotten to know me, and, you know, I’m out to a bunch of a people in town, which means I’m probably out to about everybody. And I don’t care, like, sorry. But, you know, I’m a weirdo no matter where I live—you know, I’m not married, I don’t have kids, I don’t have grandkids, I don’t have relatives usually around. No matter where I live, I’m always on the outside, so I’ve just learned—don’t expect anything, just kind of take care of your own business and see how things go. But you’ve got to make friends where you live, and you’ve got to make some alliances where you live, so that the quality of life... I mean, we help each other around out here, kind of, and I’m getting more insight on that sort of thing.”

Even though her identity as a lesbian farmer, her being “from the city,” and her lack of familial history in the area did not fit with expectations of a placeholder, she had found acceptance in the community by appealing to their values of community and familiar, but older, styles of farming even though she was not dependent upon a “Good Farmer” for her success.

### **Alternative Networks**

In her study of domestic abuse support groups, Loseke (1999) identified that the formula story of wife abuse contained specific elements that were assumed to be shared across participants’ experiences, and that participants had to engage in identity work to fit their own lived experiences within the formula story narrative. Support groups encouraged identity transformation so that women would “display institutionally preferred personae” (121) fitting with the formula story of wife abuse. In this study, each of the women who engaged in placemaking shared that they had found encouragement, support, and validation in alternative non-institutionalized networks that encouraged their display of non-institutionally preferred

personas. Whereas some landowners shared how dependent they were upon their tenants or that they did not feel change was possible, those connected with alternative agricultural networks found examples in other women's stories through the opportunities to learn from one another's successes and failures as they engaged in active management of their farmland fitting with their vision. Some of these networks were explicitly for women, such as WFAN or Annie's Project (an education program for farm women delivered nationally by the Extension service through land grant universities), while others were conservation-focused (Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation or Iowa Prairie Network) or agricultural-focused (Practical Farmers of Iowa or groups focused on alternative agricultural practices).

Given the lack of existing groups or networks explicitly for women farmland owners, the recruitment of participants for this study likely attracted those landowners already engaged in some sort of an alternative network. Seventeen participants in my sample were engaged in some sort of an alternative network, and the majority of these were involved in more than one network. Only seven were not involved in any networks related to land management, conservation, or agriculture. In the following discussion, I analyze three ways alternative networks support placemaking: (1) mentorship, (2) inclusive support and information sources, and (3) alternative narratives.

Mentorship was an important aspect of these alternative networks. Through these networks, Gina shared that she had both found a mentor and that a younger farmer seeking mentorship had approached her. This was important to Gina because she envisioned her farm being a learning farm for women: "I feel like I'm holding onto this land in hopes for the future, that there will be more women involved in it." Alternative networks were important for mentor support because, as Kristin explained, finding a mentor is a challenge: "But to find a really good



mentor is almost like trying to ask somebody to tell me where your favorite fishing hole is at. They aren't going to tell you. It's really sad, and I'm seeing that more and more."

Alternative social networks were viewed as inclusive sources to find needed information or to source financial and emotional support. Such spaces were especially needed by those who felt they had been excluded because of gender or because of their vision for their farmland:

I mean, obviously, I think Women, Food and Agriculture Network definitely helps with that [learning about conservation]. You feel sane because there's a whole network for it. When I came here, it just was a godsend just to know I had a safe place where somebody understood me and I could learn, really. Other people's stories are important. *Karen*

The informal network of WFAN provided Karen a place where she felt "sane" even though she was different than her peers. WFAN also provided inspiration for women to engage in placemaking. In describing how she came to realize she must fire her farmland tenant (whom she had inherited when she inherited her father's farmland), Bev shared that it was because of WFAN that she realized she needed to make a change on her land:

That's why that person doesn't farm for me anymore, because his standpoint was—anything I was trying to do was costing him money, and my standpoint was, anything he was trying to do was costing me my farm and my way of life. So it was a philosophy thing more than—he's a bad farmer or more than I was a bad landlord. It was a philosophy. It was never more apparent. And Women Food and Agriculture is the reason this man is not farming for me anymore. [...] His idea was—it has to make money. And mine was—you have to save the water.

In this way, the informal network provided support for her to challenge the expectation of the placeholder that she should defer to her tenant and helped her find confidence to fire him even though he had been chosen by her father. Cathy shared that it was through Practical Farmers of Iowa that she learned more about organic farming and sought tenants who would fit her vision to transition her farmland from conventional to organic:

I think they perceived me as the clueless widow from Des Moines who didn't know what rents were and they kind of got one over on me. And then we had kind of a conflict a year ago, and I

pointed out to them that I knew what I was doing and that I was very intentional about giving them the rental rate and the five-year lease because I wanted to help them. And I think that might have changed their perception a little bit, not so sure but [...] But it was a real eye-opener for me, because now I understand the importance of putting in the lease conservation practices, tilling practices, requirements for cover crops, all of those kinds of things that I thought weren't necessary.

Creating opportunities for women farmland owners to talk with one another about changes they wanted to see on their farmland, and to learn from one another's stories, was one way that women engaged in learning more about their farmland and taking steps toward future action:

I think when it comes to the conservation part that women are still...it's why we still have, it's why it's hard to get them to come to the meetings, because conservation has been uninteresting, it's been very gendered, it's been presented in ways that are complex and complicated and gosh, you have to know all this language, and you have to know all the acronyms, and you have to know all the science, and you have to know all these things.

*Barbara*

Landowners shared that even some of the alternative agricultural groups had experienced cultural shifts. One retired farmer who now rents out her farmland to a beginning farmer shared that in the beginning of her career, when she sought community through different alternative agricultural groups, "I was the only vegetable grower in there, and the rest were mostly men and one or two wives of men. I started going around and doing introductions, and the wives were not introducing themselves, and I'm like "Hello!" (Donna). Having an alternative group especially for women, such as WFAN or Extension's Annie's Project, provided important community.

Alternative networks provided space to reconsider their farmland's future within new narratives. The hegemony of the "Good Farmer" narrative is such that believing other uses for land or other land management arrangements may not be possible. As interview participants Paula, Jenny, Elizabeth, Joyce, and Brenda all implied or directly stated, other arrangements for land management are not or did not seem possible given their current situations. Challenging "this is how we've always done this here" is a hard thing to do, and has consequences to personal health, such as the anxiety and stomachache two of the women reported upon firing their

former/inherited tenants. These networks made change possible that may not have been possible through institutionalized programs offered by state or national agencies. Kim shared that a state conservation agency had partnered with her and her husband to put easements on their farmland that would restrict its future use. When asked why she pursued these easements, she explained “The short answer? Because that is the right thing to do. That’s also my answer when people say, “Why do you farm organically?” Because it’s the right thing to do.” Laura, an out-of-state landowner, shared that it was thanks to Women, Food and Agriculture Network that she had been able to implement changes on her land: firing her former management company, hiring new tenants fitting with her vision, learning more about soil health, and, ultimately deciding to move to Iowa to be closer to her farmland:

I didn’t have any mentors that could help me through what this was. I felt very isolated and alone a lot of the time. I mean, WFAN was like amazing, of course [inaudible] even know it existed. But I just feel like for women in kind of a men’s farming world, it can be very intimidating, extremely. And I think that a lot of the men that I’ve worked with just never knew how serious I was about stuff until they finally got it now that I was checking everything out.

These networks were especially important for landowners who lived out of state because they helped shape these landowners’ ideas of what was possible in terms of change on the farmland.

Alternative networks alone are not enough for women to engage in placemaking.

Landowners’ life situations and the constraints placeholders experience—complicated co-ownership situations, influential family members and advisors, distance from their farmland, time/financial capacity to engage in its active management, knowledge—shift and change over time. In explaining how she and her husband could do all they wanted in terms of sustainability and conservation on her farm, one participant explained, “We don’t have any children, by the way, so we have no inheritance. We don’t have to grapple with those horrible decisions that have already gone around once in our family” (Kim). Even if farmland owners are interested in

engaging change, life easily gets in the way: “It’s just kind of being a manager for a business that you really weren’t trained to do and that you’re doing on the fly when you have your full-time stuff that you’re also doing...it’s a challenge” (Brenda). Placemaking was easier for those who were widowed or whose partner/co-owners were all on board with the changes.

### **Conclusion**

Land has long been a means to perpetuate power and maintain social inequality. The expectations of the placeholder help to maintain patriarchal systems of land tenure and control of the land. My research finds that women farmland owners are not invisible in cultural narratives about agriculture, but rather have a pivotal role upon which the continuation of the narrative depends: they are expected to maintain land tenure systems. While women landowners may have power on paper, they may choose to defer this authority to male others who are seen as legitimate decision-makers on the landscape, or as “Good Farmers.” Intervention opportunities arise if women, at pivotal life changes or in changes with land ownership, have access to alternative networks of information and support. Those who enact change in their land management relationships or on the land itself challenge the expectations of behavior for placeholders. Alternative networks are an important source of mentorship, community, and new narratives for those engaged in placemaking; however, even with engagement in these networks, women may experience other constraints if co-owners would rather maintain existing relationships or defer decisions to others.

The placeholder is a character in the cultural story of USA agriculture, but may be found in other stories. What it means and how people resist or redefine it has implications beyond this research area. The placeholder can be found in other contexts in which people are expected to maintain a certain position or status to perpetuate a specific familial or social order even though

they no longer have social capital, such as family businesses, political “lame ducks,” substitute teachers, or interim executives. These examples are each expected to occupy a specific status to maintain the continuance of an existing legacy, social situation, or power structure. Those who are engaged in placemaking that resists cultural expectations are less visible in our cultural stories, or are sterilized so as to make them fit better within these stories. Those who resist cultural expectations of behavior, for example Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks, are more often remembered as leaders within accepted cultural narratives rather than radicals contesting power structures.

Shannon Elizabeth Bell’s (2013) study of women activists in the mountain top removal resistance in Appalachia details the risks involved in placemaking. For these women, the environmental justice movement provided a similar transformative space for them to challenge family and community norms that privileged the coal industry. Together, they developed new narratives about the importance of public and community health in their towns. This work was not without its risks. One of the most visible activists reported how often coal trucks and union members tried to run her off the roads, often at the point on the mountain turns where the roads were most narrow or steep. Similarly to the women landowners who faced intimidation or threat because of their public actions, these activists’ disruption of patriarchal social order inspired consequence and retaliation. Land tenure systems and the story of the “Good Farmer” have important implications beyond USA agriculture as, increasingly, our industrialized system is being exported and implemented in the Global South. With the new technology comes old systems of power that will influence existing gender orders and social institutions.

Future research might examine in more depth the status of women farmland owners who do not have familial connection to the area or to the land. Are those who, like Gina, are “not

from here,” and who bought the farmland on her own (didn’t inherit) less likely to threaten the existing symbolic codes of the formula story? Might such women engaged in placemaking eventually become placemakers, a new character in a new cultural narrative about farmland? As demographics shifts continue and more women inherit land or outlive their spouses, and as farmland ownership continues to concentrate, control of farmland comes more into question and continuance of women as placeholders within this formula story becomes increasingly important to the maintenance of existing patriarchal land tenure systems. How do the expectations of the “Good Farmer” formula story influence men as they become more dependent upon women farmland owners? Is there an opportunity for that story to evolve into one that is more inclusive and sharing of power? As the balance of power shifts on paper, intervention opportunities may emerge through new stories.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: “I WILL FIGHT NOT TO BE A PART OF THE PROBLEM:”

### WOMEN FARMLAND OWNERS AND WATER QUALITY IN IOWA

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Keywords: water quality, pollution, social problems, agriculture, women

**ABSTRACT** This paper analyzes how women farmland owners make sense of water quality in Iowa. Women farmland owners have been absent from the framing of agricultural water pollution as a social problem in Iowa even though they own approximately half of Iowa’s farmland. Using qualitative data from women farmland owner meetings and in-depth interviews with women who own farmland in Iowa, I discuss how women landowners have used a land-as-community orientation in their framing of the problem and construction of three categories of claims: 1) public health claims, 2) generational claims, and 3) ecological health claims. Their land-as-community framing that differs from the land-as-commodity ideology dominant in claimsmaking.

### Introduction

“Des Moines has declared war on rural Iowa,” (Petroski 2015) claimed Iowa’s Governor Branstad to the editors of Iowa’s statewide newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*. Activists, community organizations, state leaders, and special interest groups all have engaged in claimsmaking about Iowa’s water quality pollution as a social problem. Agricultural nitrate pollution in Iowa’s waterways is not new and has long been a known major contributor to the Gulf of Mexico’s hypoxic zone (Alexander et al. 2008, Goolsby et al. 2001). Recently, the increased nitrate pollution in the sources of drinking water for the state capital, Des Moines, has inspired Iowans to define nitrate pollution as a social problem. The controversy’s political aspects have captured national attention (Kardas-Nelson 2015, Smith 2015) as the Des Moines Water Works

has filed suit against drainage districts northwest of the city in March 2015 in a precedent-setting case to force their compliance with the federal Clean Water Act (Des Moines Register Editorial Board 2015).

Situating this analysis of water quality as a social problem within women farmland owners' experiences contributes to understandings of systems of power that may influence the claims-making, framing, and solutions presented. Social construction is the process by which people assign meaning to their experience in the world (Best 2013:11). The term "social problem," from a constructionist perspective, refers to the social processes of defining the problem and to the related activities (claims-making, framing) through which people construct meaning and action about the problem (Schneider 1985). Social problems are conditions "defined as wrong, widespread, and changeable" (Loseke 1999:6) and, as such, are conditions for which people identify solutions and see possibilities to fix.

Women farmland owners have been largely absent from the claims-making of water quality as a social problem in Iowa even though they own or co-own 47% of Iowa's farmland (Duffy and Johanns 2012). Previous research in Iowa (Druschke and Secchi 2014, Eells 2008, Everett 1983, Wells and Eells 2011) and beyond (Barbercheck et al. 2012) has found that women have been left out of the conservation conversation when it comes to managing their farmland. In a critique of social problems analysis, Patricia Collins (1989) cites the systemic invisibility of problems that do not draw the attention of successful claims-makers, such as the poverty of African-American women. She cautions that in social problems analyses conducted after social problems have already been defined, those absent from claims-making activities are often ignored because "[g]roups unequal in power have differential access to the claims-making process itself and thus to the politicized process of defining social problems" (p. 86). As Gordon

(2007) emphasizes, analyses of social problems must be situated within systems of power:

“When social problems are disassociated from systematic structures of power, all that is left are strongly held moral goods and bads, absolute choices in the supermarket of publicly acceptable and commonsensically secured problems” (p. 317). What is defined as a social problem, by whom, how, and when, reflects relationships and structures of power: “Just what exactly is a social problem? What do we call that which is not a social problem? What are social problems that have not gained public currency? Investigating the constraints and conditions in which some things become socially problematic and others do not helps to explain not only what is, but what can be” (Gordon 2007:313). Joubert and Davidson (2010) argue that nature is managed or altered according to those in power to fit “the dominant set of social values within the culture” (9). To understand water quality as a social problem, I ask not just who is framing and how, but whose claims are absent.

This paper analyzes how women farmland owners make sense of water quality in Iowa. Using qualitative data from women farmland owner meetings and in-depth interviews with women who own farmland in Iowa, I analyze women farmland owners’ sensemaking about water quality in an increasingly polarized landscape. I identify their claims and the place of their claims within larger framings of agricultural production as land-as-commodity or land-as-community orientations to understand the potential for shifts in narrative and social change.

### **Study Area**

Iowa’s identity as an agricultural state is important in the claims-making process about water quality as a social problem. Over 90% of Iowa’s land is used for agricultural production (IDALS 2014). Iowa ranks first in the United States for production of corn and soybeans, as well as hog and egg production, and produces nearly 30% of the nation’s ethanol (IDALS 2014). In

2012, Iowa exported over \$11.3 billion in agricultural products (IDALS 2014). This agricultural production is made possible by the extensive engineering of the farmland.

Farmers and agribusiness have been made to further a specific mode of agricultural production that has extremely altered Iowa's landscape and at significant cost to natural resources generally considered a public good, such as water. Through the use of subsurface drainage—or tiling—farmers drain excess water from Iowa's landscape, thus allowing the cultivation of row crops. One estimate compares the investment of tile drainage in Iowa to the Panama Canal's construction (Peterson and Englehorn 1946:23 in Arbuckle, Morton, and Hobbs 2013:554). In recent years, high market prices for corn and soybeans have placed economic and social pressures to crop less productive and/or highly erodible lands (Alexander et al. 2008), such as prairie potholes and other wetlands. A consequence of the increased productivity of farmland has been the increasing pollution of waterways and erosion of soil (Cox, Hug, and Bruzelius 2011, Naidenko, Cox, and Bruzelius 2012), both which contribute to the listing of waterway impairments on Iowa's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Section 303(d) list, as required by the Clean Water Act (IDNR 2015) and to the state's status as one of the top contributors to the Gulf of Mexico's hypoxic zone (Alexander et al. 2008). The number of waterways listed on the EPA's 303(d) list is growing. The past three years have shown an increase of 15%: in 2012, 642 waterways were listed as impaired and in spring 2015, 725 waterways were listed (Pitt 2015). Because the list is comprised only of those waterways with credible data, not all impaired waterways are on the list and this increase in listed waterways might be due to an increase in the amount of credible data that can be used to identify impairments, not necessarily an increase in nitrate or phosphorus pollution.

Iowa ranks nearly last of all the states in proportion of public land—2010 figures found only 1% of Iowa’s land owned by state or federal governments (NRC 2010). Given that most land in Iowa is privately owned, natural resource and conservation organizations have partnered with landowners to implement conservation on the landscape through voluntary approaches. In 2013, the state instituted a Nutrient Reduction Strategy in partnership with Iowa State University to “assess and reduce nutrients to Iowa waters and the Gulf of Mexico” (ISU, n.d.) that included a suite of voluntary conservation practices to mitigate nitrate pollution. Citing a steady increase in nitrate pollution in the Des Moines water supply, and the increased financial burden to their customers, the Des Moines Board of Water Works Trustees filed a federal Clean Water Act lawsuit against the supervisors of three agricultural tile drainage districts in counties northwest of Des Moines on March 16, 2015 (Tidgren 2015).

Though agriculture remains a major contributor to the state’s economy and identity, population in Iowa has shifted from rural to urban. In 2010, 56.5% of Iowans lived in metro areas and these areas were growing while the population of rural areas was declining (Peters 2010).

### **Water Quality as a Social Problem in Iowa**

Loseke (1999) defines social problems as conditions believed to be “wrong, widespread, and changeable,” and, most importantly, as conditions that people believe “*should* be changed” (6). They are both objective (in that they are conditions that can be measured) and subjective (in that they have different meaning to different individuals) (Loseke 1999:7). The objective conditions are not problematic until they are identified, named, and given meaning (Loseke 1999:13). For example, water pollution had been a measurable problem in Iowa’s waterways and a contributor to the Gulf of Mexico’s hypoxic zone for some time (Alexander et. al. 2008,



Goolsby et al. 2001), but it was not until there were objective measures of record levels of nitrate pollution in the Raccoon River increasing the filtration of water at the Des Moines Water Works facility and impacting the utility bills of Des Moines residents that it was framed as a social problem (Hamilton 2015).

Cultural narratives about agriculture shape the subjective construction and framing of water as a social problem in Iowa. The type of agriculture practiced by the majority of Iowa's farmers can be characterized as productivist agriculture, described as promoting the intensification of technology, concentration of farmland, and specialization of production rather than diversification (Trauger 2001:154). The symbolic codes embedded within cultural narratives about agriculture are often depicted in terms of oppositions: centralization vs. decentralization, dependence vs. independence, competition vs. community, domination of nature vs. harmony with nature, specialization vs. diversity and exploitation vs. restraint (Beus and Dunlap 1990:590). Chiappe and Flora (1998) criticized these oppositions as representing male cultural norms, for example, the productivist paradigm, or the dominant agricultural system of the United States that is prioritized through formal agricultural policy, is often gendered as "male" in its prioritization of yield and profit (Eells 2010; Fink 1986; Sachs 1983, 1996; Trauger 2001) and excluding specific types of agriculture and farmers that may more often be identified as "female" in their prioritization of community or biodiversity (Carolan 2012; Trauger 2004; Trauger et al. 2008; Trauger et al. 2010; Wells and Eells 2011).

Because of their marginalization in agricultural conservation (Eells 2008, Wells and Eells 2011), women landowners have not been visible as public claims-makers in Iowa's water quality debate. The control most women farmland owners are expected to cede to their tenants (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011) contributes to their absence from cultural narratives of

agricultural land management and, subsequently, their absence from claims-making of water as a social problem. Polletta (1998) explains: “Narratives not only make sense of the past and present but, since the story’s chronological end is also its end in the sense of moral, purpose or telos, they project a future” (140). In Iowa, the narrative of productivist agriculture has established that the physical environment is best used for the production of highly intensive row-crop agriculture, consistent with Greider and Garkovich’s (1994) argument that those in power impose “a specific definition of the physical environment, one that reflects the symbols and meanings of a particular group of people” (194). It is not a surprise, then, that in the context of water pollution in Iowa both the causes and the solutions are framed in a way that privilege certain voices and ideologies.

Just as one traveling through Iowa cannot miss field upon field of corn, it is equally hard to miss the narrative of the Iowan farmer as someone who “feeds the world” through advances in agricultural technology as depicted in displays at the Iowa State Fair, publications from the land grant university, and on commodity groups’ advertisements on billboards across the state. The power of agribusiness and industrial agriculture maintains a ‘treadmill of production’ that perpetuates continuous expansion and adoption of new technology with often negative consequences to public and ecological health (Schnaiberg and Gould 1994).

### **Claims-makers and Claims**

Loseke (1999) defines claims-makers as the “people who say and do things to convince audiences that a social problem is at hand” (19). She further defines social problems claims as “any verbal, visual, or behavioral statement that tries to convince audiences to take a condition seriously” (Loseke 1999:26). In Iowa, those engaging in claims-making about water quality as social problem have consisted of citizens/community groups, government leaders, the Des Moines Water Works public utility CEO, and private industry/commodity groups. These groups

make claims about water quality—whether it is a problem, or not, and how to address it, through the process of claims-making (Loseke 1999:19). In the following discussion, I will briefly describe the claims-makers and claims made in the social construction of water pollution as a social problem in Iowa.

In the realm of social problems, social change groups “organize themselves in order to convince others that a harmful condition is at hand and that something must be done” (Loseke 1999:28). Social change groups engaging in claims-making about water pollution in Iowa have consisted of environmental organizations like Sierra Club’s Iowa Chapter, Iowa Environmental Council, and Citizens for a Healthy Iowa, as well as social justice organizations like Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (CCI). These organizations have sided with the claims made by the Des Moines Water Works. In addition, they have called into question the voluntary approach adopted by the state, calling it insufficient and unrealistic (Osterberg and Kline 2014). Also engaged in claims-making are groups such as the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance, composed of agribusiness groups’ representatives including the Iowa Corn Promotion Board and the Iowa Pork Producers Association, that promote voluntary efforts to water quality improvements through implementation of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy (IAWA 2015a).

Des Moines Water Works (DMWW), an independently operated, public utility providing drinking water to 500,000 customers in the Des Moines metro area (DMWW, n.d.) faces potentially paying as much as \$100 million to build a new nitrate removal plant to continue service (Hamilton 2015) because its river water sources have recently had nitrate levels six times higher than the federal limits (Editorial Board 2015). DMWW has been investing in ways to manage Iowa’s nitrate pollution for some time. In 1991, DMWW constructed the world’s largest ion exchange facility to remove nitrates from its water sources (Des Moines Register Editorial

Board 2015). CEO and General Manager, Bill Stowe, has been a very visible and controversial public figure in the claims-making process. Stowe, in an April 2015 *New York Times* profile of the lawsuit and controversy claimed: “It’s very clear to me that traditional, industrial agriculture has no real interest in taking the steps that are necessary to radically change their operations in a way that will protect our drinking water” (Smith 2015). Agribusiness leaders and government officials have labeled the lawsuit and Stowe’s remarks as “unIowan.” A farmer from one of the impacted counties upstream from Des Moines claimed, “It’s a confrontational approach. I think there’s been a lot of progress made. I don’t know any farmer who wants to increase nitrates in the river” (Smith 2015).

While these groups all agree that water quality is a problem and must be addressed, they differ in their construction of victims and villains. Loseke (1999) explains that “[c]onstructing victims is necessary to convince audiences that a condition is a problem” (75) and, on the flip side, “villains are the people responsible for the condition” (77). Iowa CCI has largely pointed its fingers at “corporate agriculture” through villainization of confined agriculture feeding operations (CAFOs) as evidenced through their marketing campaigns claiming “They dump it, you drink it, and we won’t stop until they clean it up!” (Espey 2014). In the claims from the DMWW lawsuit, the victims are the Des Moines residents paying more for their public utility. In the claims from the agricultural lobby and industry groups, and the state’s leaders, the victims are Iowa’s farmers and the villains are urban Iowans or environmentalists attempting to undermine the farmers’ right to farm.

Commodity groups have banded together with the Iowa Farm Bureau to issue statements with claims that the lawsuit “undermines the strong relationship that once existed between Iowa’s largest water utility and farmers upstream” and “[m]erely enacting regulation will do

nothing to improve water quality. We will remain focused on empowering farmers and land owners to select and use scientifically proven practices that can have a real impact on water quality, which benefits all Iowans” (IAWA 2015b). The Iowa Farm Bureau, the state’s chapter of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF)<sup>13</sup>, claims to represent Iowa’s family farmers (Iowa Farm Bureau 2015), criticizes the DMWW lawsuit (Steimel 2015). The AFBF has been accused of representing corporate interests of agricultural commodity groups rather than family farmers and has sued the EPA for its efforts to limit agricultural water pollution in Chesapeake Bay (Shearn 2012); it appears the Iowa Farm Bureau is following a similar path.

Some state leaders, including the governor, have sided with the agribusiness claims. When meeting with the Des Moines Register’s editorial board in January 2015 about the then impending lawsuit, Governor Terry Branstad told the board that “Des Moines has declared war on rural Iowa. I think instead of filing a lawsuit, Des Moines should sit down with the farmers and people who want to do something about it” (Petroski 2015). In the same interview, Branstad also claimed that the increased water pollution was not tied to farmers’ practices, but rather was the fault of increased and more extreme rain events (Petroski 2015).

Given their significant stake in this issue, what claims have farmers and agricultural landowners made? Despite claims of the Iowa Farm Bureau, recent research suggests that Iowa’s farmers, when asked individually, are conscious of needed actions to remedy Iowa’s water quality problem, but farmland owners, and women in particular, have received far less attention.

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<sup>13</sup> The American Farm Bureau Federation is a nonprofit farm organization whose membership includes those who buy insurance but that regularly engages in lobbying on behalf of agribusiness.

In the 2009 Farm and Rural Life Poll, farmers answered six questions concerning water quality beliefs and the potential impacts of nutrient removal wetlands. Seventy-eight percent of respondent farmers “agreed that Iowa farmers should do more to reduce flows of nutrients and sediment into waterways and lakes, and 58% believed that nutrients from Iowa farms contribute to hypoxia (oxygen depletion) and sedimentation in Iowa lakes and rivers” (Arbuckle 2009). These farmers were supportive of strategic and targeted conservation strategies to mitigate the impacts of flooding, erosion, and agricultural run-off (Arbuckle 2009). Since many farmers rent the land they farm, landowners are an essential partner in realizing the potential in this finding.

Women farmland owners, especially, may have an important role to play in solutions to the water quality problem. Women own or co-own 47% of Iowa’s farmland and rent their farmland at higher rates than men (Duffy and Johanns 2012). Their claims are absent from the claims-making of water quality as a social problem, despite previous research findings that women’s land management decisions often incorporate a holistic understanding of the interconnections among land health and human health (Bregendahl and Hoffman 2010, Krause 2009, Wells, Phillips and Neuman 2004). Collins (1989), in her critique of strict constructionist analyses of social problems, argued that the absence of claims may indicate that potential claims-makers have been constrained or their claims have been suppressed and “[t]his suppression, rather than the onset of organized, identifiable activism, marks the origins of a social problem” (Collins 1989:87).

We know little about women farmland owners in Iowa or beyond because they have largely been ignored in research about landscape-level decision-making (Eells and Soulis 2014). Jean Eells (2008) conducted an institutional ethnography agricultural conservation in Iowa. She found that agricultural conservation institutions privilege land-as-commodity ideological

orientations (prioritizing the economic value of conservation) rather than the land-as-community ideological orientations (prioritizing the land's ecological functions) that were held by women farmland owners in her study. These orientations are rooted in Aldo Leopold's land ethic (1949/1989) in which he defines conservation as a "state of harmony between men and land," (207) achieved through the implementation of a land ethic, which "enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204). Eells (2010) describes Leopold's ([1949]1989) land-as-commodity vs. land-as-community binary as a continuum upon which landowners may shift. An earlier study of women landowners in Cass County, IA found that women respondents, when asked about influences upon their decision-making about their land, ranked concern for the environment as slightly more important than their need for income (Wells, Phillips, and Neuman 2004), similarly reflecting a land-as-community orientation. Findings from listening sessions held by the Women, Land and Legacy (WLL) program, an outreach program for agricultural women in Iowa, likewise found that participants' decisions were influenced by their view of their land as part of an interdependent community consisting of family, community and nature (Bergendahl et al. 2007:4). What we do know about women landowners in Iowa not only suggests that they are potentially significant in terms of water quality problem solutions, but that research needs to quickly shift to incorporate their perspectives if we are to address very real and pressing socio-ecological problems such as water pollution.

## **Framing**

Claims-makers "construct and shape" our understandings of social problems (Loseke 1999:177) through the use of frames. Frames are "interpretive schemata that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large"

(Snow and Benford 1992:137). “Frames also are critical because they construct the *causes* of conditions” as originating in structural or social forces (Loseke 1999:73). In Iowa these causes include both social structures (the lack of regulation at the state level) and social forces (such influence from commodity groups).

Gubrium (2005) defines framing as a process of narrative construction: “The process of identification and rhetorics of persuasion take place in communicative context—in narrative environments whose accounts and resources variously serve to affirm or challenge both old and new stories about social conditions. Such environments reflexively shape the realization of problems in question, and mediate their sustenance or transformation” (2005:527). These narratives may “privilege particular kinds of accounts for institutional purposes. Conversely, one would expect counter-narratives to be marginalized, “repaired,” or otherwise challenged, if not kept in tolerable spaces” (Gubrium 2005:256). For example, narratives about sustainability have been co-opted by Syngenta and Monsanto to sell products, such as herbicides, that those in the sustainable agricultural movement claim harm the environment.

Increased nitrate pollution found in the sources of drinking water for Des Moines, Iowa’s capitol, has prompted a reframing of the agricultural water pollution problem—as no longer only a rural issue, or agricultural issue. Work of DMWW CEO Bill Stowe and others have framed it as an issue impacting anyone who drinks water in Iowa. As Snow and Benford (1992) explain, frames are successful when they are able to share information and experiences in new ways, such as this reframing of water pollution as a statewide issue. Still, the framing of water as a social problem in Iowa remains within the land-as-commodity orientation, framing the social problem within the market economy fitting the productivist narrative of agriculture in which



everything has a price. For example, this framing focuses on the consumption of water and the price of nutrient removal rather than the ecological impact to the stream ecosystem itself.

## **Solutions**

Social problems, because they are changeable through human action, require a solution, or some sort of social change, that can be either individual or require public policy (Loseke 1999:100). Two contrasting solutions have emerged in the framing of water quality as a social problem: regulation or voluntary compliance. Claims-makers such as Iowa CCI or the DMWW are pushing for the enforcement of the Clean Water Act and greater regulation of agricultural pollution. Others, such as Iowa Farm Bureau or Iowa Agricultural Water Alliance, continue a long-standing push for voluntary compliance, now through implementation of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy. Environmental claims-makers have lined up on the side of regulation, and the farm lobby and commodity groups, as well as some from ISU, on the side of voluntary compliance.

Health of the land was important to the Iowa women landowners participating in the WLL program (Bergendahl et al. 2007). Through water quality improvements, farmland owners may adopt a view of their land that extends beyond the field border or fencerow to encompass the watershed. As of yet, framing of water as a social problem continues to work within the agricultural narrative of productivism, rather than reframing solutions in new narratives. Solutions within these frames rely upon the implementation of existing structures of power. Ribaud (2015) proposes two ways to address water quality problems through policy: compliance or elevating conservationist values in the decision-making process. Elevating conservationist values would fit with a land-as-community orientation, but may face continuing challenge by the narrative of productivist agriculture: “In the context of landscapes, power is the

capacity to impose a specific definition of the physical environment, one that reflects the symbols and meanings of a particular group of people” (Grieder and Garkovich 2007:17). The power relationships involved in defining and controlling landscape experiences are critical to understanding “how physical ‘nature’ is managed and altered according to the dominant set of social values within the culture” (Joubert and Davidson 2010:9). Power may shift depending upon who eventually succeeds in their claims of water quality as a social problem; however, the power remains within the productivist narrative.

This paper, building on recent studies of the marginalization of women farmland owners in particular in regards to conservation (Eells 2008, Wells and Eells, 2011), goes further to study their sensemaking claims and how these may support or offer alternatives to existing frames and solutions. How do women farmland owners engage in sensemaking about water pollution? What is their place in the process of claims-making about Iowa’s water quality? Do they fit within the frames as currently defined?

### **Methods**

I collected data using a grounded theory methodological approach (Charmaz 2014), interviewing and observing 155 women landowners in three stages. In the first stage, I recorded transcripts of five Learning Circle meetings organized by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) during the fall of 2012 and attended by 72 Iowa women farmland owners. In the second stage, as participant observer, I recorded notes at five Field Days organized by WFAN during the summer of 2013, attended by 73 Iowa women farmland owners. Fourteen of the women who attend one of the 2012 Learning Circles also attended a Field Day in 2013, and so are only counted once in the tally of total participants. Finally, in the third stage, I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-six women farmland owners from December 2014 through

March 2015. Two interview participants had previously attended a Learning Circle or Field Day. All study participants identified as Iowa farmland owners. Two participants in Learning Circles or Field Days lived in Iowa but owned farmland in other state, and so I removed them from my sample.

In the following analysis I will identify interviewees by pseudonym, and the attendees of Learning Circle or Field Day by the location of their meeting, to protect their confidentiality. Even though WFAN's mission is to serve women in sustainable agriculture, participants in the WCL program are largely women engaged in or leasing their land for conventional row-crop farming and who may not identify with sustainable agriculture (Adcock 2014).

I partnered with WFAN, a nonprofit organization based in Iowa, because it is the only group providing conservation-focused programming for non-operator farmland owners. As a non-profit group that serves women in sustainable agriculture, they can be exclusive in their meetings in a way that other groups operating in the state of Iowa, such as WLL<sup>14</sup> or Annie's Project<sup>15</sup>, cannot. WFAN has been organizing women-focused conservation meetings through their Women Caring for the Land<sup>16</sup> (WCL) program since 2010. The Learning Circle meeting

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<sup>14</sup> Women, Land & Legacy (WLL) began as an outreach effort to agricultural women in 2004 as a collaboration among government, non-profit, and faith-based organizations. It is now housed with WFAN.

<sup>15</sup> Annie's Project is a national educational program for farm women coordinated by land grant university Extension offices.

<sup>16</sup> Women Caring for the Land is a WFAN program designed for women who are non-operator landowners. Their curriculum is available at [womencaringfortheland.org/](http://womencaringfortheland.org/)

model was developed by WFAN as a peer-to-peer model for conservation learning (WFAN [2006] 2007) and is based upon research findings that indicate agricultural women learn best in special topic meetings in small groups with their peers (Bregendahl and Hoffman 2010). The original mission of WFAN's WCL program was to "directly improve water quality by educating and empowering women landowners to enact their own strong values for conservation on their land" (Krouse 2009). At Field Days, following brief introductions, women spent the majority of the time visiting wetland conservation projects on farmland owned by local women where they engaged in hands-on activities such as water sampling, and identification activities of plants and different macro-invertebrates. A WFAN staff member, herself a farmer with over twenty years of experience leading and organizing women in agriculture, facilitated Learning Circles and hosted Field Days.

WFAN recruited participants for Learning Circles and Field Days through word-of-mouth, calls to or from local Extension offices and agency staff such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), advertisements in local publications, and letters mailed through NRCS. Meetings were held in five different regions of Iowa—Northwest, Northeast, Central, South, and West.

I recruited interview participants through agricultural listservs and word-of-mouth; many were referred to me by their co-owners or tenants. In recruiting interview participants, I used theoretical sampling to reflect diversity of phase of life, age, and type of ownership situation. Charmaz (2008) recommends theoretical sampling be used once a researcher already has some preliminary categories developed in order to refine and identify links among categories (205). Data analysis from the 2012 Learning Circles and 2013 Field Days, and review of the literature on women farmland owners (Eells 2008; Petrzalka, Buman, and Ridgely 2009, Petrzalka and

Marquart-Pyatt 2011, Salamon 1992, Wells and Eells 2011) informed the creation of different categories of women farmland owners to structure recruitment of interview participants (Table 7).

**Table 7 Categories of Interview Participants**

<b>Landowner Category</b>	<b>N=26</b>
<i>Land Ownership</i>	
sole owner	8
co-owner with siblings	10
co-owner with spouse	8
co-owner with parent	2
<i>Landowner status</i>	
non-operator landowner	19
active farmer/farm partner	5
<i>Marriage status</i>	
married/partnered	16
widow	4
<i>Distance from land</i>	
in-state landowner	20
out-of-state landowner	6
<i>Land acquisition</i>	
purchased farmland	12
inherited farmland	17

Following the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), I first coded the data using initial, emergent codes grounded in the data (e.g., history of autoimmune disorders in the family), then followed with focused coding to identify codes of interest to my research questions (e.g., connecting family's health history to concerns about water quality), and finally connected subcategories to categories through axial coding (e.g., public health claims) (Charmaz 2014). Throughout this process, I wrote analytic memos that guided my analysis and subsequent data collection. This data analysis was further refined for reliability and validity through my participation in a grounded theory seminar during 2013-2015. In this seminar we conducted collaborative open coding of the data that was refined through axial coding in theoretical memos that were then discussed in the seminar.

I practiced reflexivity in an effort to remain mindful of my positionality and that of the participants throughout the data collection process (Hesse-Biber 2007:117). Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2007) defines reflexivity as necessary for feminist research and "the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process" (129). My reflexivity included checking in with WFAN staff as the data collection evolved, grounding my research through continued engagement and participant observation in meetings of WFAN and other community organization, sharing memos and notes with advisors and colleagues, and exchanging resources and ongoing communication with participants. While conducting research for this project during 2012 to 2015, agricultural water pollution became an increasingly politicized issue in Iowa. All participants reviewed and signed consent forms prior to the

beginning of the meetings and interviews and all data collection methods were approved by ISU Institutional Review Board #12-367 and #14-527.<sup>17</sup>

### **Land-as-community claimsmaking**

During the three years of data collection for this project, public concern about nitrates in Iowa's waterways escalated into a statewide debate. My project, while focused on one specific water quality conservation effort (wetlands), did not ask specifics about pollution or nitrates. Water pollution had not yet escalated to such a politicized issue at the time I wrote the grant with my advisor in summer of 2011, nor at the time the grant work began in the fall of 2012. I had anticipated that the recent history of flooding in Iowa (summers of 2008 and 2010 both brought floods, following a decade of increased flooding) and then the drought during the summer of 2012 would impact participants' interest and responses related to water quality, but had not expected water pollution to be identified as an issue of concern throughout the data collection as it was. Nitrate pollution and the DMWW in particular emerged as subjects of discussion during interviews as interview timing (December 2014-March 2015) overlapped with the increased threat of the lawsuit and its subsequent filing on March 16, 2015. Though none of my questions asked about nitrates, or the lawsuit, reference was made to both in interviews.

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<sup>17</sup> Data collection for this paper was part of a larger research project funded by a federal grant to study women landownership and engagement in conservation measures to improve water quality, specifically wetlands, in an area of the Midwest being targeted for its agricultural nutrient-loading contributions to the Gulf of Mexico's hypoxic zone.

I found that these women farmland owners' claims have been largely left out of the dominant claimsmaking activities about conservation on Iowa's farms. My analysis identifies a land-as-community orientation to women farmland owners' claims. Responsibility is an important component of a land-as-community orientation, and is a shared value of three claims made by women farmland owners as they engaged in sensemaking about water quality in Iowa: 1) generational claims, 2) public health claims and 3) ecological health claims. Together, these claims frame water quality as a social problem in the realm of public good that differs from the land-as-commodity ideology dominant in current agricultural narratives.

### **Land-as-community**

Landowners' claims about water quality reflected land-as community orientation. The valuation of land-as-commodity, and the prioritization of profit over public good, was viewed by landowners as the cause of water and soil degradation. Sarah viewed this perspective as short-sighted: "People are farming for money, not thinking about the water." A land-as-community perspective "is to see beyond the imperative of economic efficiency and to see attributes beyond all-out production, such as community, family, neighbors, and other living beings" (Wells and Eells 2011:137A). Important to the orientation of land-as-community is the landowners' articulation of responsibility.

Landowners felt an obligation to do what they could do as landowners to improve and protect Iowa's water quality even when they knew that the benefits would not directly impact their farm, or knew that their farm was not directly responsible, as illustrated in the following quote:

Luckily we're up on a hill, and we don't have a lot of land contributing runoff to our farm. But also like, hey, we kind of need to be the priority so we don't run off to other people's water and the streams and all that stuff.

*Karen*



Even when it seemed the problem was impossible to fix, or beyond their control, some landowners expressed an insistence to act: “I know we can’t really fix it, it’s only on our farm for about a mile and a half, but I will fight to not be part of the problem” (Claire). Karen expresses a similar sense of moral responsibility and accountability for the health of the land as it connects beyond the farm (to the creek, to the Gulf of Mexico’s Dead Zone):

So when I came back and moved back about this time, because it was like, well, I own part of this farm now, and I’m not going to own it if we’re contributing to the Dead Zone—this can’t be right. So I’ve either got to back and figure out how I can help move us in that direction or dissolve my ownership.

Both Karen and Claire feel strongly enough about the seriousness of water pollution and their role as farmland owners to potentially impact or change water pollution that they did not want to be associated with farmland if it meant they are unable to make a positive impact to water quality.

Responsibility inspires a shifting from an individual frame, reflecting the scale of changes needed to improve water quality—a watershed scale—and encouraging moving beyond viewing land merely as a financial investment. Paula also reflects a community-focused perspective:

Nobody realizes what this stuff is going to do to our environment, and we all take pride in our environment. We all have a hand in that, just by owning our little acreages or just owning a lot in town that your home sits on. You’re involved. The first time that you sign that piece of paper that you want to buy a home, whether it be in the country, in town, you have ownership of land. And no matter where you are, you’re affected by everything that goes on. And that’s what people don’t realize, because if it doesn’t affect them, it goes in one ear and out the other.

For some, this inspired activism, as Bev shares:

And it’s like the water situation, so I’m going to go back to my activist mode for a moment. It’s like the water situation, and I’ve been saying it—you can’t fight the pig guys at the supervisors because it’s stacked that, if they fit that silly matrix, they get to have their --- pig farm. And I have said in, since 2001, the whole long time that I’ve been fighting pig farms... At first it was the guy who has this farm next to me, and he was going to put one a mile from my house or

whatever it is, the 1800 feet. It was going to be 1800 feet from my sister that died. Thirty of us signed up the petition, took it around, went to the Methodists—he and his mother are Methodists—and said, “This is not...,” went to him and said, “This is not neighborly. We don’t want this.” And he didn’t build it. He has other pig farms, but he didn’t build that one. Other people are not so neighborly and ended up building one by my friend... Now I have one that’s three miles from me and one that’s two miles from me and one that’s two miles from me the other way. In the middle of August when it’s the most humid it is all year long, in the middle of the winter when it’s hoarfrost foggy, they could be in my yard; because water molecules, fog molecules carry the odor. And I can sit in my hot tub and feel like I’m sitting in the hog confinement. And that’s close to me—two miles is not close to me, is not within that matrix, okay. And the supervisors really cannot do anything.

Farmland owners in this study were motivated by responsibility to act on their generational, public health, and ecological claims.

Linking responsibility to love, as one Learning Circle participant did, emphasizes an emotional rather than solely economic connection to land that inspires action to improve water quality:

I love the land. I want to take care of the land. We rent ours out. We have test plots... the seed business, but we really don't have wetland on ours. We have... soil, and it's pretty well all tiled out in higher up. But I know the watershed goes on down, and I want to know everything that we can do to help with that. So I'm here for all that.

Central Iowa Learning Circle

Rather than talking about conservation in terms of mitigating harm, Gina framed conservation as an act of compassion:

Well, land is sacred anyway. I don't believe in private ownership of land, but that's the system it is. So then if I have to privately own a piece of land and I privately own this piece of land, then it's my responsibility to protect it and to help to heal it.

Karen, too, shared “I love the land. I want to take care of the land.” Expressions of their love of their land was inclusive of water, trees, frogs, wetlands, foxes, birds, prairie, and flowers. Their land was not only acres farmed, but a community to which they felt compelled to care for and protect. Leopold’s land ethic requires “love, respect, and admiration for land” (223) because, he explains “[w]e can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or

otherwise have faith in” (214). Love is absent from the claimsmaking of those framing water pollution as an economic problem, but as a Northeastern Iowa Learning Circle participant shares, love can be a driver for conservation actions: “So we love this land, and we want to take care of this land, so we need to do whatever we can to do that.” In their emphasis of connections among water, soil, and personal health, these landowners identified their place, as Leopold describes, as a member of the biotic community rather than conqueror of the biotic community ([1949] 1989).

Landowners were not naïve about the needed process for social change regarding water pollution and the lack of responsibility on the part of the state’s leaders. Bev explained that it was only thanks to mounting social pressure and escalation of water pollution as a social problem that action was even being talked about:

So a class action lawsuit or a lawsuit like Des Moines Water Works... I have said for years that, until the townies, and I don’t mean that mean, but until the townies got involved, until the townies noticed that farmers out there, that ag use of the land was killing their water, until they got involved, it was not going to stop. Because in South Carolina, until the Chesapeake Bay got so bad that they stopped building hog confinements, they stopped building chicken confinements, until it got that bad in Iowa, it wasn’t going to stop. Des Moines Water Works finally got smart, finally got somebody who could stand up and yell and bluster his way about. Until they got Bill Stowe there, who says, “What?! We’re not having this.”—who goes to Dennis Kucinich meetings and stands up and speaks his piece, instead of being politically correct and sitting down. Until people start going to EPC meetings, until Branstad fills the EPC18 with hog confinement people and now you don’t have a voice at the EPC until ICCI goes and hollers or carries on, until Bill Stowe goes to the EPC and says, “You know what? Des Moines Water Works is having to deal with hog shit in the water, high nitrates in the water.”—nothing’s going to change. And now we’ve got somebody who’s saying it, and it’s hard to put that genie back in the bottle or that noise back in the... It’s hard to stop people from hollering when they start getting facts.

*Bev*

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<sup>18</sup> EPC stands for Environmental Protection Commission, who in Iowa are appointed by the Governor and is charged with reviewing permits for the construction large-scale projects with environmental impacts, such as the construction of confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

Bev's view that the claims of DMWW and the environmental groups were helping to change things was echoed by Sarah, who had farmed all of her life. She argued that the DMWW lawsuit was a good thing because it would make some of those farmers "clean up their act."

In the following discussion I will analyze landowners' specific land-as-community claims: generational claims, ecological health claims, and public health claims.

### **Generational Claims**

Generational claims are those made about how things have worsened over time or the pace of changes in regard to water quality. Claire reflects upon the changes in water quality on her family farm that she had witnessed during her life:

We do have a creek running through. I remember when there were fish in it. I used to be able to go catch fish. My dad caught bullheads out of there and we'd eat them. I would go down and catch carp, crawfish, and there hasn't been a living thing in there that I'm aware of for 20 years so.

*Claire*

When asked about concerns for her farmland, Jenny, a landowner who grew up on a farm in Iowa and only recently bought farmland and moved back, reflects about changes in water quality:

You know, I'm not totally involved. I hear news bites, and I hear conversations and whatnot, but it's very disturbing to me to see a lot of the CAFOs<sup>19</sup> going up, ruining the water, ruining the land. I really don't like that. I know that there is a lot of farmers that just don't know about

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<sup>19</sup> CAFO stands for "confined animal feeding operation." In Iowa, CAFOs for the production of pork and poultry are common.

conservation and don't know about, maybe they should be doing something different to prevent erosion or to mitigate erosion. And that's frustrating, but I also think the times are changing, and there's probably a lot of older farmers who are doing it the same way they did 50 years. They're not going to be around forever, so things will be changing. It's just slow.

Karen, who had inherited her family's farmland with her siblings, wishes they would take the land out of production and let the land return to prairie and wetlands in order to improve water quality:

So thinking about future generations and where Iowa used to be, and like this hay production, it's like we're not really getting that much from it. I'm like, what would it be like just to put it back to prairie, just let it go? Oh, my god, do you know what a relief that would be to me. So that means wetlands, it means prairie, it means letting the land be what it needs to be. And just think what that would do for water quality.

Rachel's long-view of her land's health incorporated future generations of her family and her community at large:

We're people with very strong work ethics and values, and the land is important to us to carry on for future generations. I mean, it's not that we're farming it for ourselves and how much money can we make, but how can we protect the land for everybody.

These generational claims reflected a land-as-community orientation in their view of natural resource depletion as a loss. Even though the farm productivity may have increased, the pollution of the streams, loss of the wetlands or prairie, and pollution of the water are too great a cost. Their long-term thinking about their farmland reflects values beyond immediate economic motives in the management of their farmland. They lament the slowness of realization that natural resources have intrinsic value, in and of themselves, and the loss of these areas.

### **Public Health Claims**

Public health claims acknowledge the dependence of physical health upon ecological health. Emily describes her discomfort with the use of chemicals and antibiotics in crop and livestock production:

I am really pretty uncomfortable with big agriculture. I guess I feel like I don't think the big agriculture companies really have the long-term interest in mind as far as the chemicals that they use on the land and... I think some of the, especially the implement manufacturers now are maybe coming around to, you know, developing implements that help with conservation practices. As far as a lot of the chemicals that are used on the land--fertilizers, the pesticides, herbicides--I really am uncomfortable with them. I really just feel like you look at the beef population and I just feel like it's really messing with the water supply long term.

The interconnectedness between soil health and physical health was clear in Rachel's expression of concern about the use of chemicals, their pollution in the water, and cancer risk:

We're this huge aquifer, and I don't know how many people even get that, that whatever we put into this soil is eventually going to come back to us. So by us putting all these chemicals into our, our fields to get better corn, better soybeans, better whatever, we're going to be drinking those and eating those. And where do you think our cancers are coming from? You know, I'm going to get off on a tangent here if I keep going, but it's, we need to be aware of what we're putting in, because we're going to get it out.

For Rachel, the farm was more than just an investment or a familial legacy, but a public good.

Also interesting is her use of the collective "we." She is a widow now farming her land on her own, but she speaks from a collective point of view. Karen, reflecting on her family's history with autoimmune disorders, connects their exposure to having played in their farm pond as kids at a time when chemical use was prevalent:

I mean, your health, and just think about that water quality of the fish. My brother goes ice fishing in our pond. And it's so interconnected. It's so blind of us to not think that we're not affecting that and our own health. It comes back to a bite us in the butt. Just think how much I'm paying, literally paying, but also just paying as far as quality of life. And my dad dying of Parkinson's. I'm sorry—I see a connection. I have rheumatoid arthritis, my sister does, my brother is borderline. It's like the three youngest—we had the most formable bodies at the time when that [exposure to chemicals on the farm] was really big.

Speaking about a neighbor, a Learning Circle participant expresses concern about the resignation of others in respect to their health:

But people are so resigned to the problem. My colleague, they farm commercially, and she said, "I know I'm going to die of cancer – it's just the way it is out here." And I just couldn't believe it. She makes no effort at all to make any other choices; and it's how everybody's doing it, so there's kind of a pressure socially to kind of stay that way. *Western Iowa Learning Circle*

As the above participant acknowledges, the resignation of her colleague reflects the “role of power relationships in defining and controlling experience in the landscape” (Joubert and Davidson 2010:9). The hegemony of productivist agriculture does not encourage the linking of public health claims, such as cancer, to agricultural practices. These are expected to be part of the cost of agriculture because productivist agricultural views land, and bodies, as commodities.

### **Ecological Health Claims**

Ecological health claims acknowledge the impact of one’s farmland on the larger watershed. As Carol emphasizes, what happens on one farm does not stay on that farm:

And we all know, with rapid silt runoff, etc., etc., and it goes into the Mississippi, and then it flows down to the Dead Zone, we’ve all heard this.

For Bev, the 1993 flood brought home the interconnection of her farm, other farms in her watershed, and their influence to those downstream. This realization inspired her to take conservation action on her farm to improve water quality and slow the movement of water:

It takes a day and a half to two days for that water that comes off of my farm... Now, we’re not talking up in the 28,000 acres that the Raccoon River Watershed... We’re talking 60 miles by air or as the crow flies—I don’t know how many miles that is by river; somebody in the Raccoon River Watershed can tell you. We’re talking two days from now, [my creek] is going to be in Des Moines. That water has come off my land and all of those acres up above me. [My creek] that’s right there by my road is headed to Des Moines where my daughter and my son still live, okay. I knew that that meant that runoff off my land, off those other people’s land, was the cause of some of what they were dealing with in Des Moines. And that winter, while I was in Des Moines, that next winter, was the winter of ‘94, we started trying to figure out what in the heck we were going to do to stop that runoff. And it was the same time USDA had a buffer strip program. And in the spring of ‘96 we planted our first buffer strips, which was 26 acres of prairie grass, around all of those 19 acres of creek on my property, a hundred foot wide and around all of that to stop [the runoff]. [...] You can see the difference those buffer strips make. They are still there; they’re wonderful for cover, for habitat, for changing the landscape, for building the soil, for the water quality. I’m not the only buffer strips in my area, but I like to say that I’m doing the carbon sync.

These ecological health claims recognize the impact of agricultural practices on water quality.

Carol and Bev both accept that water pollution is a problem, and that it is tied to farm practices they can change rather than factors beyond their control such as increased rain.

Landowners identify ecological health as a reason to try to improve water quality on their farms. Emily and her spouse had begun a project to build a pond on their farm in a wet area that was not being farmed:

[O]ur main goal with our pond is to, is to catch and slow runoff water, so we planted... Anyway, it's about ten acres that drain through there, and then as soon as they cross the road, they just like leap down into the creek. It's not very far. It's a very big drop; it's like a 50-foot drop and maybe like a hundred, maybe a hundred and fifty feet. Anyway, it's, it quickly goes into the creek, and it's getting a lot of runoff from these conventional farm fields. So that, that was our goal is to slow that water down, hopefully clean it, so that when that water leaves our farm and goes to the creek that it'll be cleaner than..., well, clean—that's our hope. And then we're going to do a wetland, like a native wetland planting around it and then shrubs and then trees. It's in kind of the slough that we weren't farming. I'm thinking, protect the other land from erosion. And if the water's going through that grassland there, hopefully that will improve the water quality, too, of the runoff.

The run-off Emily hoped to slow down—from conventional farm fields—was from her neighbors, but she saw the opportunity to turn a spot on her farm (the slough) into something that might help water quality. Another landowner, Carol, also shared that her concern about runoff from cropland inspired her to put in conservation measures to improve water quality:

I put in a wetland. I worked with the DNR, and I put in a wetland, and this was some of the crop that was farmed and put into row cropping. But there was excessive runoff. There's like an alluvial fan over here coming off the upper, tillable ground. And to make a long story short, I took this out of crop production, and I worked with the DNR, and we put in a wetland.

Reasons behind these farmland owners' conservation efforts were not fear of regulation, nor incentivization of conservation, but their claims that ecological health is important.

## **Conclusion**

My study identified important claims made by women farmland owners as they engage in sensemaking about their farmland's connection to water quality. These women farmland owners framed Iowa's water pollution problem within a land-as-community ethic that prioritizes responsibility not only toward the water utility customers in Des Moines or those along the Gulf of Mexico's Dead Zone, but toward a larger sense of community including soil, wildlife, and



future generations. If these claims were accepted within the larger framing of the problem, the land-as-community framing of water pollution may support needed environmental change on the landscape: “what is important in any consideration of environmental change is the meaning of the change for those cultural groups that have incorporated that aspect of the physical environment into their definition of themselves” (Greider and Garkovich 1994:21). This philosophy about land also fits with Ribaud’s (2015) identified path for solving water quality problems: elevating conservationist values in the decision-making process about farm production.

The marginalization of women farmland owners in conservation (Eells 2008, Wells and Eells 2011) may not position them to be prominent claims-makers in the debate about how to best address Iowa’s water pollution problem, and their current generational, public health, and ecological claims about water quality may not fit the dominant cultural framing of the social problem. Their absence in this debate may signal a social problem of another kind, related to the inclusivity of agricultural narratives and exclusion of those whose relationships to their farmland do not identify with land-as-commodity narratives.

Leopold argued that a land ethic is a “product of social evolution” and “an intellectual and emotional process,” ([1949] 1989:225). Claims by women farmland owners in this study reflect their acknowledgement of this evolution as both a needed and necessary step in their own farms and the futures of soil and water as public goods. Just as Collins (1989) calls our attention to the systemic avoidance and silencing of those social problems that do not serve those in power, the land-as-community claims made by women farmland owners may signal a larger problem than nitrate pollution in Iowa’s rivers. As Bev predicted, the loudest claims-makers may prove to be successful in their claims-making, inspiring action to address the water pollution, but whether their claims-making evolves to a more community-oriented ethic remains to be seen.

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## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This dissertation has identified ways women are resisting constructions of appropriate land use and land control and also reconstructing their relationship to their farmland in ways that fit their values and concerns. In effort to understand the experience of those marginalized by cultural agricultural narratives, I have studied women farmland owners in Iowa for the past three years. They have shared their stories with me while we toured woods on utility vehicles in sub-zero temperatures, sat in study rooms at local libraries, drank coffee at kitchen tables, held crawdads in our palms, and walked across pastures. As Wells and Eells (2011) argue, a shift to a more community- and ecologically-based agriculture requires the inclusion of more voices. “[I]n the long run, a people is known, not by its statement or its statistics, but by the stories it tells,” wrote Flannery O’Connor (1969). It is my belief in the power of stories as sites of resistance and transformation that has inspired this dissertation project and its placement of the voices of women farmland owners in Iowa at the center of its inquiry. In doing so, this research project attempts what Erik Olin Wright describes as “developing a sociology of the possible, not just of the actual” (2010:1).

We both make and are *made by* our stories argues Christian Smith (2003): “We tell and retell narratives that themselves come fundamentally to constitute and direct our lives” (p. 64). These narratives are subject to re-evaluation and recreation (Loseke 2007). If we are to revise our agricultural narratives to be more inclusive in how power is shared on the landscape or in how agriculture is practiced, these narratives first need to be re-evaluated. Studying how those who have been marginalized experience cultural narratives might inform this re-evaluation and recreation. In this conclusion, I will summarize the findings and contributions of the overall study, constraints and challenges to this research, and finally share areas for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this dissertation was to study how women farmland owners experience cultural narratives in relationship to their management of their farmland. As Christian Smith (2003) explains, “Narrative is our most elemental human genre of communication and meaning-making, an essential way of framing the order and purpose of reality” (pp. 151-152). I focus this study on women farmland owners because they have been underrepresented both in the study of land management (Druschke and Secchi 2014, Eells and Soulis 2014) and in land management decision-making (Carolan 2005, Wells and Eells 2011) despite their near parity with men in landownership (Duffy, Smith, Reutzel and Johnson 2008). In this analysis of women farmland owners’ experiences of and place within gendered agricultural narratives, I identify both constraints to their action as well as how they engage in placemaking, offering opportunities for intervention and engagement in both agricultural land management and agricultural narratives. Women may play a critical part in the implementation of needed conservation on farmland and the transition to a more inclusive land tenure system.

My analysis (Chapter 2) of how women farmland owners’ experiences are excluded—through boundary maintenance and othering—from the active management of their farmland and the importance of homosocial spaces for women to begin to challenge gendered cultural narratives supports previous research identifying the importance of alternative spaces for agricultural women interested in land management (Barbercheck et al. 2012, Bregendahl, Smith, Meyer-Didericksen, Grabau, and Flora 2007, Wells and Eells 2011). In participating in the creation and exchange of cultural capital and knowledge, women landowners may begin to construct a new narrative within these landscapes.

My analysis of cultural narratives' expectations of women to occupy a placeholder position in relation to their farmland (Chapter 3) finds daily decision-making and interactions with co-owners, tenants, and others to recreate systems of power related to land management. Through placemaking, often supported by participation in alternative networks, women farmland owners resist the expectations of the formula story's placeholder position and begin to recreate a narrative that reflects their vision for their farmland.

My analysis of how women farmland owners frame the social problem of water quality (Chapter 4) offers a different perspective on the claimsmaking of water pollution as a social problem in Iowa. The land-as-community orientation of women farmland owners in this study prioritizes the personal responsibility and the valuation of public, ecological, and generational health within their self-definitions as landowners. Some landowners implemented actions on their land that supported these claims.

### **Contributions**

Greider and Garkovich (1994) describe the study of how power relationships change in the context of the increasing global struggle over landscapes as a "classical sociological problem" (p. 21). This dissertation offers an analysis of this problem in the context of farmland ownership in Iowa. I analyze the constraints of cultural narratives upon the women farmland owners' active land management and their place within cultural narratives, and study how their constructions of land ownership influence their claims making in the context of water quality as a social problem in Iowa. This dissertation has both applied and theoretical contributions. I will first discuss its applied contributions, then address its theoretical contributions.

My dissertation contributes needed knowledge to the significant gap in research about women farmland owners. Given their status as owners or co-owners of approximately half of the

farmland in the United States (Duffy, Smith, Reutzel, Johnson 2008), women farmland owners are an important demographic for current and future agricultural transformation. The case of the current politicization of water quality in Iowa (Chapter 4) is just one example identifying how women landowners may be pivotal in the implementation of landscape-level changes.

Further, I support and build upon the findings of an institutional ethnography conducted by Jean Eells (2008) in Iowa focusing on the institution of conservation and work by Jean Eells and Betty Wells (2011) studying women farmland owners and conservation adoption. Their research encourages an “asset-based rather than a deficit or remedial model” of engagement with women farmland owners (p. 138A). My findings are in agreement with their conclusion that it is not for lack of interest or care that women landowners may not engage in conservation, but because of existing constraints given the expectation that they be placeholders. My findings also support previous research by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network ([2012] 2013) and Bregendahl et al. (2007) that women-only space facilitates learning and action for women landowners.

Understanding how women may experience these gendered constraints within existing agricultural systems may help inform outreach and programming. Agencies, non-profits, and educators working with women landowners would do well to include strategies and tools to help navigate family conflict, communicate hard-to-discuss topics, and to provide opportunity for community building among landowners who may otherwise be isolated. My findings about the importance of homosocial spaces and alternative networks support previous research studying women farmers’ conservation adoption by Barbercheck et al. (2012). Barbercheck et al.’s (2012) study found that membership and participation in organizations and networks were important to supporting the use of conservation. Work by non-profits such as Practical Farmers of Iowa and

WFAN in Iowa already is addressing this need through the creation of programs and tools that address questions of land tenure and negotiating with tenants and programs, such as WFAN's Women Caring for the Land program.

My project's findings support earlier research by Lise Saugeres (2002) in France. Saugeres (2002) found that women are expected not to be interested in farmland, while men are assumed to have embodied knowledge of the farmland thanks to patrilineal inheritance of land and their relationship to the land as farmers. In her study, women who farmed their land only did so if they lacked a brother or husband to farm it for her or if she lacked femininity; women were expected to only have a marginal relationship to farmland because they lack needed knowledge about its management and an inherent relationship to it through the act of farming. This study complements findings by Sandra Salamon in her study of land tenure in Illinois (1992) detailing how systems of land tenure recreate systems of power within communities.

My findings that women are constrained by expectations at the levels of social interaction and cultural narratives have important implications at the landscape level. In their survey of Iowa landowners, Druschke and Secchi (2014) found that women reported being more likely to value collaboration in conservation and were more concerned about water and soil conservation than men. As placeholders, women are expected to defer decisions and maintain existing land use and tenant arrangements, which may constrain their implementation of changes that would directly benefit soil and water quality on their farms. Further, my findings that women landowners may feel implicitly or explicitly excluded from spaces where agricultural information is exchanged and find support and validation in alternative networks means that conservation professionals may be challenged to engage them in collaboration if they rely only on traditional channels of

recruitment or outreach. This may be one reason why, as Druschke and Secchi (2014) find, conservation institutions are failing to reach women.

The expectations of the placeholder have important implications for greater inclusivity in agricultural decision-makers and agricultural practices on the land. Poletta, Chen, Gardner, and Motes (2011) reviewed narrative research and found that people, unless they lack the resources to do so, usually end up conforming to the expectations of narratives (p. 116). However, institutional narratives are required to change over time as social norms of acceptable behavior change or new social problems are defined. Poletta et al. (2011) cite the change in institutional narratives concerning the duration of harm caused by experiences of child abuse or Loseke's (2001) study of the emergence of the social problem of domestic violence and narratives of "battered women" as examples. Narratives can be tested and changed if individuals have the opportunity to learn new conventions (Poletta et al. 2011). Homosocial spaces and alternative networks may offer women landowners opportunities to learn new methods of land management and provide the needed community support for implementing these changes.

As Wells (1998) notes, "challenging the mainstream reality is a task never to be underestimated" (p. 386). Understanding how social inequality processes and narratives influence the engagement of women landowners in management of their land may inform future interventions and help to lead us from narratives privileging productivist agriculture to the civic agriculture described by Trauger et al. (2010) in which "complementary and embedded social and economic strategies that provide economic benefits to farmers at the same time they ostensibly provide socio-environmental benefits to the community" (p. 45), thereby lessening inequality in and beyond agriculture. Polletta (2008) explains that narratives provide a foundation for "self-identity and action" because "[n]arratives not only make sense of the past

and present but, since the story's chronological end is also its end in the sense of moral, purpose or telos, they project a future" (140). The narratives of women farmland owners, then, may offer alternatives for future identity and action on the agricultural landscape.

Schwalbe et al. 2000 called for future research about how inequality processes are resisted and how the symbolic resources used to sustain these processes are jointly created (p.443). My analysis of the cultural expectations of women landowners to be placeholders, and women landowners' placemaking, offers an example in a specific context of both examples how symbolic resources used to sustain inequality processes are jointly created and how these processes are resisted. As Loseke (2007) argues, "while individual social actors can use their understandings of cultural narratives as resources to craft their own stories of the self, these personal identity narratives are critical in shaping institutional and cultural narratives" (p. 676). Studying how this reshaping occurs in a specific context—women farmland owners—contributes to increased understanding both of how cultural narratives are sustained and how they are revised.

Loseke (2007) argues that "effective social change must be cultural *and* institutional *and* organizational *and* personal" (p. 678) and so understanding the interrelationship among narrative levels is key to landscape transformation. This study has focused on the interrelationship between cultural and personal narratives. The institutional ethnography by Jean Eells (2008) offers an example of research examining relationships between personal and institutional levels. Future studies could examine the interrelationship between personal and organizational levels (Loseke 2007).

This study, while based in Iowa, has national and global implications. Landownership trends among women in Iowa mirror the rest of the country (Duffy et al. 2008). As Sachs (1996) documented, the marginalization of women in agriculture has corresponded with increased



industrialization and the transition from smaller, diversified family farms to large-scale farms in the USA and has not improved the livelihoods of rural women (p. 7). Land is power (Saugeres 2002) and “[w]omen’s control of agricultural production is tied to their access to land” (Sachs 1983:121), yet access to land does not alone mean women are respected as legitimate decision makers about that land. As my study finds, narratives of land control continue to maintain existing social structure as women are expected to defer their power to men, or othered if they employ their legal power as landowners through placemaking. Sachs (1996) argues that land is a constraining variable for women in most areas of the world: “women’s exclusion from landownership limits their access to credit to purchase materials to succeed in an increasingly capital-intensive agricultural system” (p. 64). Land ownership may be an important first step toward rebalancing power relationships in agricultural and gender contexts; however, land ownership alone may not be enough to counter powerful cultural narratives about how land should be used, and by whom.

### **Constraints**

As a researcher from the state land grant institution studying a demographic that has been marginalized in research, policy, and practice, I tried to create contexts for data collection in which the experience of the women—rather than my own interests—were the focus. While this was a collaborative research project, it was not participatory and was influenced by the grant funding the data collection. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Wetlands Development grant that funded my dissertation research was both a gift and a limitation: it provided a stipend for my time as a doctoral student, travel for all the costs of the data collection associated with the Learning Circles, Field Days, and interviews, as well as vetted this project as credible with state and local agencies who partnered with me in coordination of the data

collection, but it also required substantial time in grant reporting and documentation, and mention of the EPA may have deterred potential participants.

The grant's focus on wetlands framed all of my data collection, perhaps limiting the emergence of other pressing questions or topics. Though many of my questions used in data collection were broad in focus, there are questions and content included throughout the project that are specific to wetlands as a conservation practice. When WFAN piloted the WCL program, participants specifically mentioned wetlands as a conservation practice of interest (Krause 2009). Women farmland owner participants' expressed interest in wetlands and current discourse surrounding soil conservation and water pollution in Iowa inspired my application for funding through an EPA Wetland Development grant. During the course of data collection for this project, water quality became a prominent environmental social problem in Iowa shaped by public discourse, likely influencing participant interest in my research topic. Disclosure of EPA funding may have influenced participation because of general distrust of government. Fear of federal regulation or intervention may also have been a constraining factor given recent political escalation of nutrient pollution in Iowa as a social problem. For the purposes of this study, wetlands were often used as a specific practice to frame discussions of land management. This may be a constraint to the participation of some who own farmland in areas that are not conducive to wetlands, and so are not interested in learning more about wetlands. These women may not have attended the original farmland owner meetings and my analysis of this initial qualitative data, and creation of my interview guide for this data collection, may only be informed by women farmland owners whose general interest in conservation was related to the potential for wetlands on their farmland. Young (1994) reminds us, "[w]ithout conceptualizing women as a group in some sense, it is not possible to conceptualize oppression as a systemic,

structured, institutional process” (p. 718). Therefore, my findings represent a population of women farmland owners rather than the population of women farmland owners, yet these findings are important to the identification, and intervention, of systemic processes that constrain women farmland owners’ engagement in the management of their farmland. As

My own values and ethics as a researcher are both an advantage and a limitation. I have tried to be transparent about my use of research methodology “in service of democratic social transformation” (Harding and Norberg 2005:2012) as I studied how women farmland owners experience cultural narratives in respect to their land management. Small (1995) discusses the reality of researchers’ values and ethics as ever present in any sort of research design. Adopting a more conventional, positivist or reductionist research model does not diminish the existence of the researcher’s values and ethics, but adopting a participatory or feminist research design may increase our ability to process and critique our blindness or projection of our values. Such methods, rooted in action-oriented research, may “remind us how important it is for scientists to be aware of prevailing scientific paradigms and the epistemological assumptions underlying their work” (Small 1995:952). I developed sensitivity and practiced reflexivity about my position as a feminist researcher through the use of different data collection methods, partnering with the Women, Food and Agriculture Network, coordinating with state agencies, using grounded theory, and embedding myself within local and state agricultural contexts.

Researchers engaged in feminist methodology and epistemology must negotiate their positionality and power throughout the research process (Harding and Norberg 2005:2012). While I have had certain flexibility and freedom as a graduate student, and the great privilege these past years to study questions of interest to me, I have also been constrained by the politicization of water quality and land management in Iowa and the influence of this within my

university. The influence of the politicization of farmland tenure was reflected by research participants; some shared that they were initially hesitant to talk to me or to attend meetings, or they refused to sign-in or share contact information, because they did not want to cause conflict in their families or communities. Farmland, and its relationship specifically to water quality and conservation, is a controversial topic in Iowa.

A final constraint is the limited diversity in this demographic. All participants are white. The majority are partnered or were partnered in heterosexual marriages. While the theoretical sampling for the interviews allowed me to interview women landowners of varying age, ownership situations, different experiences with agriculture, and those who were not partnered in more traditional marriage arrangements, my sample remains very limited.

### **Future Publications**

I will continue to analyze data collected both for this dissertation project and its related funding through the EPA Wetland Development grant beyond the three papers included in this dissertation. In addition to the preceding chapters intended for publication in scholarly journals, I plan to write the following publications:

- ISU Extension bulletin on the use of citizen science—such as the IOWATER sampling at Field Days—to engage new demographics in conservation as a land management practice
- WFAN newsletter or website article about women landowners' visions for their land, and/or successes and challenges in implementing water quality conservation on their land
- A curriculum guide for the EPA entitled *Navigating the Waters: A Wetland Development Guide for Agencies and Organizations Working with Women Landowners* to be submitted by September 30, 2015 to the EPA and uploaded to the ISU Extension Sociology website for this project.

- Additional content for the project's website:

<http://www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/navigatingthewaters/intro.html>

- A book about women farmland owners and narrative transformation

### **Areas for Future Studies**

Perhaps many of us are placeholders—waiting until we graduate, get tenure, buy the house, make more money, raise the kids, retire, before we make the change, do more, or speak up. Perhaps placeholding is ingrained not only as part of gendered agricultural narratives, but part our cultural narratives. Westward expansion, manifest destiny, the Alamo—our cultural stories about U.S. identity celebrate the individual, technological progress, “taming” of the wild, and are patriarchal, capitalist stories. Examples of placeholding in other narratives may help to piece together structural constraints across locations and contexts, while examples of placemaking may illuminate other possibilities.

Further studies might investigate the emergence of placemaking. Does it always first emerge from places of ruin or inequality? The women farmland owners whose anger over the mining of the soil and pollution of the water inspires them to protect the small bit of wetland for future generations of people and wild things are just one example of those engaged in placemaking. Other examples include the food justice movements originating in the emptied and or neglected urban neighborhoods of Milwaukee and Chicago (Block, Chávez, Allen, Ramirez 2012) or New Orleans (Kato 2013), or the rise of resistance of Appalachian communities to the continued exploitation through strip mining and mountain top removal (Bell 2013). Future research might look to other examples of placemaking, beyond the borders of the USA, where the individualism of the American capitalist narrative has not yet taken root and where people have challenged structural inequalities through community-based efforts to maintain their

autonomy, such as the indigenous-led anti-genetic engineering movements in Latin America (Abbott 2014, *Cultures of Resistance*, n.d.).

Future studies related to this work might explore gender in relation to inter-generational farms and new and beginning farmers to determine if the same barriers persist or begin to shift or change. Further, studies that investigate how cultural narratives influence expectations of landowners' legitimacy could be applied to areas of increased agricultural diversity—whether in terms of agricultural practice (areas with more small and diversified farms, or urban agriculture) or agricultural producers or landowners (areas with more women operators, minority farmers, immigrant farmers, or beginning farmers). Such studies would help us to understand the intersections of class, racial, and gender inequality and their relation to capitalist agricultural production.

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**APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION TIMELINE**

	Y1: 1/12-12/12	Y2: 1/13-12/13	Y3:1/14-12/14	Y4: 1/15-5/15
Phase 1: Learning Circles	9/2012-11/2012			
Phase 2: Field Days		6/2013-7/2013		
Phase 3: In-depth Interviews			11/2014-3/2015	
Phase 1-3: Participant Observation	ongoing			

**APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY: LEARNING CIRCLES AND FIELD  
DAYS**

Location	LC Participants (n=72)	FD Participants (n=73)	Repeat Participants (n=14)
Northwestern Iowa	13	19	5
Northeastern Iowa	22	17	3
Southern Iowa	16	14	3
Western Iowa	4	7	1
Central Iowa	17	16	2
*Participants who had previously attended a Learning Circle.			

**APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

#	Pseudonym	Age Group	Residency	Co-owner(s)	Marriage status	I/P	Tenant Relationship
1	Claire	50s	IS	Mother	Married	I	CS
2	Barbara	60s	IS	Siblings	Married	I	CR
3	Karen	40s	IS	Siblings	Married	I	CR
4	Rachel	60s	IS	None	partnered	P	CR
5	Bridget	30s	IS	Brother	Married	I	CR
6	Paula	60s	IS	Brother , Spouse, sister- in-law / mother	Married	I, P	CR
7	Cathy	60s	IS	None, Sisters	Widow	I	CR
8	Gloria	50s	IS	Spouse	Married	I	F
9	Laura	40s	OOS	Sister	Single	I	CR
10	Julie	50s	IS	Spouse	Married	P	CR
11	Jenny	40s	IS	Sibling	Single	I	CR
12	Elizabeth	60s	IS	None	Single	I	CR
13	Bev	60s	IS	None	Widow	I, P	CS
14	Emily	30s	IS	Spouse	Married	P	F
15	Michelle	40s	IS	Spouse	Married	P	F

16	Donna	60s	IS	None	Married	P	RF
17	Joyce	60s	OOS	Siblings	Unknown	I	CR
18	Kim	60s	IS	Spouse	Married	P**	RF
19	Wendy	50s	IS	Spouse	Married	P	F
20	Rose	50s	OOS	None	Single	I	CR
21	Kristin	60s	IS	None	Widow	P	CF
22	Sarah	80s	IS	None	Widow	I	RF
23	Doreen	60s	OOS	Siblings	Single	I	CR
24	Gina	60s	IS	None	Single	P	F
25	Brenda	50s	OOS	Siblings	Unknown	I	CR
26	Joan	60s	IS	Sibling/mother	Married	I	CR

## APPENDIX D: LEARNING CIRCLE AND FIELD DAY CONSENT FORM

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: *Navigating the Waters: A Wetland Development Guide for Agencies and Organizations Working with Women Landowners*

Investigators:

- Angie Carter, MS, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University
- Dr. Lois Wright Morton, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University
- Dr. Rebecca Christoffel, Natural Resource Ecology & Management Department, Iowa State University
- Dr. Tim Stewart, Natural Resource Ecology & Management Department, Iowa State University

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

#### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the attitudes and beliefs of women landowners in regards to wetlands, conservation practices, and water quality. We invite you to participate in this study because your experience is important to developing future programs and materials to better serve the growing number of women landowners across Iowa and the Midwest.

#### DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will include attending a Learning Circle hosted by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN, taking part in an activity about wetlands, and answering a short survey.

The Learning Circle discussion will be digitally recorded and then transcribed for analysis of your interests and questions about conservation. The wetland activity will involve sorting and rating statements about wetlands. This information will be entered into a software system to develop a map of beliefs and attitudes about wetlands. Any identifying information about you will remain confidential and known only to the research investigation team listed above.

The Learning Circle will last approximately 4 hours and include a lunch provided to all participants. You may leave the Learning Circle at any time.

#### RISKS

You may experience discomfort in sharing questions or opinions with your neighbors and other community members. In order to avoid foreseeable risks associated with this, we have sub-contracted with the Women, Food and Agriculture Network to facilitate the meeting using their Learning Circle meeting model. This meeting model emphasizes peer to peer learning and a constructive environment.

#### BENEFITS

Your participation in this study will inform the creation of a replicable program model entitled *Navigating the Waters: A Wetland Development Guide for Agencies and Organizations Working with Women Landowners*. Information gained in this study will increase natural resource management agencies' and organizations' knowledge and understanding of women landowners' conservation attitudes, beliefs, and questions.

The research project will include future meetings, such as Field Days, focusing on topics and questions generated from the Learning Circles and wetland activity. We hope you will attend these future meetings and activities if they are of interest to you; however, you are in no way obligated to do so.

Further information about this study and future meetings or events is posted on the Iowa State University Extension website: <http://www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/navigatingthewaters.html>

#### **COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study other than your time. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

#### **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time without consequences.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, the Environmental Protection Agency (the funder of this study), and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: all participants will be assigned a unique code that will be used on forms instead of their names; study records will be available only to the research team; recordings and transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the project manager's office; recordings and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the project is completed. If results from this research project are published, your identity will remain confidential.

#### **QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

For further information about the study, contact:

- Angie Carter, Iowa State University Graduate Student and Project Manager, Department of Sociology, 317B East Hall, Ames, IA 50011, Tel: 515-294-3383, Email: [carter@iastate.edu](mailto:carter@iastate.edu)
- Dr. Rebecca Christoffel, Iowa State Extension Wildlife Specialist and Department of Natural Resource and Ecology Management Assistant Professor, 339 Science II, Ames, IA, 50011, Tel: 515-294-7429, Email: [christof@iastate.edu](mailto:christof@iastate.edu) OR Dr. Lois Wright Morton, Iowa State University Department of Sociology Professor, 303 East Hall, Ames, IA, 50011, Tel: 515-294-2843, Email: [lwmorton@iastate.edu](mailto:lwmorton@iastate.edu).

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.



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**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE**

You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study. Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature) (Date)

**INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE**

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

Investigator's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Investigator's signature) (Date)

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

### *Navigating the Waters Informed Consent Document*

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

#### INTRODUCTION

Angie Carter, PhD candidate in sociology, is conducting this study as part of her dissertation research. The purpose of this study is to learn more about how women landowners manage their farmland. We invite you to participate in this study because your experience is important to developing future programs and materials to better serve the growing number of women landowners across Iowa and the Midwest.

#### DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will participate in an interview lasting approximately one to three hours, depending upon what you wish to share. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your farmland, its management, its history, and its future. You may end the interview at any time. The interview will be digitally recorded and then transcribed for analysis of your experience as a woman landowner. Any identifying information about you will remain confidential and known only to the researcher.

#### RISKS

You may experience discomfort in sharing details about your relationships with family, co-owners, or tenants in regards to the management of your farmland.

#### BENEFITS

Your participation in this study will inform natural resource management agencies' and organizations' knowledge and understanding of women landowners' conservation attitudes, beliefs, and questions. For more information about this project, visit the Iowa State University Extension website:

<http://www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/navigatingthewaters.html>

#### COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study other than your time. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

#### PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

**Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time without consequences.**

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, the Environmental Protection Agency (the funder of this study), and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These

records may contain private information. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: all participants will be assigned a unique code that will be used on forms instead of their names; study records will be available only to the researcher; recordings and transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the project manager's office; recordings and transcripts will be destroyed three years after the project is completed. If results from this research project are published, your identity will remain confidential.

### QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.  
For further information about the study, contact:

- Angie Carter, Iowa State University PhD Candidate and Project Manager, Department of Sociology, 317B East Hall, Ames, IA 50011, Tel: 515-294-3383, Email: [carter@iastate.edu](mailto:carter@iastate.edu)
- Dr. David Schweingruber, Iowa State University Sociology Professor, 318 East Hall, Ames, IA, 50011, Tel: 515-294-4079, Email: [dschwein@iastate.edu](mailto:dschwein@iastate.edu)

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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### PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study. Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

(Participant's Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) \_\_\_\_\_

### INVESTIGATOR SIGNATURE

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

Investigator's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

(Investigator's Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Thank you so much for meeting with me today to talk about your farmland. My name is Angie Carter. I'm a PhD student at Iowa State University in sociology. I study women farmland ownership in Iowa. I am very interested in your experiences as a woman owning farmland in Iowa because I grew up in Iowa and care very much about the future of our state. What you share with me today will be confidential. I will compile your stories with others from other women around the state to write my dissertation about how women manage their farmland and their visions for their farmland's future. There won't be anything identifying you personally in my dissertation. My hope is to eventually write a book about what I learn from my conversations with you and other women around the state. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I have a few papers I will go through with you first before we start. Please stop me at anytime to ask me questions. This is a consent form that is required by Iowa State University. It describes my dissertation research study about women farmland owners in Iowa and explains that your participation is voluntary. You can stop at any time and skip any of the questions I ask. It also explains that the interview will be recorded on my digital recorder so that I can better listen to you now and go back to the transcript later if I have questions about what you said. I will also take notes while we talk in case, for some reason, the recording doesn't work.

I will give you some time now to read through it, and then we can talk about your questions. There are two copies—one for you to take with you and keep in our files, and one for me to take for my files.

Before we begin, I want to remind you that even after our interview today you can call me anytime—my contact information is on the form--if you have questions. Again, the interview will be confidential. I will remove any identifiable information about you, your farm tenant, your family, and your farm. You should also feel free to not answer any questions you feel uncomfortable about or that do not apply to you, and please know that you can end this interview at any time. Do you have any questions now?

### **Interview Questions:**

#### **1. Please tell me a little about yourself...**

- a. Tell me about your childhood...
  - i. Where did you grow up?
- b. What is your experience with farming?
  - i. Did you live on a farm growing up?
  - ii. How long did you live there?
  - iii. Do you live on a farm now?

#### **2. Please tell me about your farmland...**

- a. How many acres do you own?
- b. How long have you owned it?
- c. How long has it been in the family?
- d. What has it been used for in the past?
- e. How is it used now?

#### **3. Tell me about what your farmland means to you...**

- a. What do you love most about your land?
- b. What worries you most about your land?
- c. What do you like best about owning farmland?
- d. What is hardest about owning farmland?

#### **4. Tell me about your farmland's ownership situation. Anything you share with me about co-owners or tenants will remain confidential.**

- a. Is your farmland owned by multiple people now or are you the sole owner?
- b. Tell me about your experience being a co-owner/being a sole owner...
  - i. How long as the ownership been this way?
  - ii. What is most rewarding?
  - iii. What is most challenging?
  - iv. Describe your ideal land ownership situation....

#### **5. Tell me about how your farmland is managed. Again, anything you share with me about co-owners or tenants will remain confidential.**

- a. Tell me about who manages your farmland now....
- b. *If it is a person other than the woman I'm interviewing....*

- i. What sort of agreement do you have with this person?
- ii. How has this relationship worked out for you?
- iii. When and how did this relationship begin?
- iv. What as your relationship with this person prior to their managing your farmland?
- v. How long have you shared this relationship?
- vi. Has the relationship ever changed?
- vii. What do you like most about this relationship?
- viii. Is there anything about this relationship you would like to change?
- ix. How do you negotiate decision-making on your farmland?
- x. Describe your ideal relationship with a land manager or tenant...

*c. If it is the woman I am interviewing...*

- i. Tell me about your experiences managing your farmland...
- ii. How long have you managed your farmland?
- iii. Have you always managed this farmland?
- iv. What do you like most about managing your own land?
- v. What is hardest about managing your own land?
- d. What have been your options as a farmland owner in managing your land?
- e. Why do you manage your land as you do?
  - i. Were there others who wanted you to do something different?
  - ii. Examples?

**6. Tell me about your thoughts about conservation on your land...**

- a. Tell me about conservation on your farmland....
- b. What are some examples of conservation on your farmland?
  - i. When were these implemented? By whom?
- c. Who makes decisions about conservation on your farmland?
- d. How are decisions about conservation managed?
- e. What are your thoughts about wetlands?
  - i. Have you ever considered wetlands as a possibility on your farmland?
- f. How would you describe your farm's relationship to water quality in IA?

**7. In your opinion, what makes a good farmland tenant?**

- a. How do you think your community, co-owners, or farmland tenant answer in response to this question?
- b. Do you feel there are some people who are better farmland tenants in your community than others? Why?

**8. In your opinion, what makes a good farmland owner?**

- a. How do you think your community, co-owners, or farmland tenant answer in response to this question?
- b. Do you feel there are some people who are better farmland owners in your community than others? Why?

**9. Tell me about your personal experience as a farmland owner....**

- a. Have there ever been any conflicts about the management of your farmland?
  - i. Example?
- b. How do others perceive you as a farmland owner?
  - i. Family, co-owners, tenant, advisors...
  - ii. Can you give me an example?
- c. How do others view your management of your land?
- d. Do you feel you are respected as a farmland owner?
  - i. Why? Example?
- e. Are there others in your community who are more or less respected as farmland owners?
  - i. Why? Examples?
- f. Where do you learn information or get advice about your farmland?
- g. Do you talk about your farmland with other women?
  - i. Where do you have these conversations?
  - ii. How often do they happen?
  - iii. Who initiates them?
- h. Does your being a woman have any influence upon how others treat you as a farmland owner?
- i. Does your being a woman have any influence upon how you manage your farmland?

**10. Tell me about your farmland's future...**

- a. Do you plan to continue to manage your farm as it is managed now?
- b. What plans do you have for your farm's future transfer?
- c. How do you think others view your plans for your farmland?
- d. What hopes do you have for your farmland's future?

**11. What do you see as the future of Iowa farmland?**

- a. What role does your farm have in this vision?

**12. What else would you like to share with me about your experiences as a farmland owner?**

Thank you so much for talking with me today and sharing these stories. I will be conducting interviews this fall with other women farmland owners. Would you have any friends or family who you think might be interested in talking to me? I will leave you my card and please feel free to share my information with them. I plan to finish my dissertation next spring and so it is important that I talk to women this fall about their farmland. There is a website associated with my research project and the website address is on your consent form. You can check there for updates and progress on the project, or contact me at anytime. Do you have any other questions before I go? Thank you so much!



## APPENDIX G: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR LEARNING CIRCLES AND FIELD DAYS

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

Date: 8/1/2014

To: Angie Carter

CC: Dr. Rebecca Christoffel

317B East Hall

339 Science II

Dr. Lois Wright Morton

317C East Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Navigating the Waters: A Wetland Development Guide for Agencies and Organizations  
Working with Women  
Landowners

IRB ID: 12-367

Approval Date: 7/31/2014

Date for Continuing Review: 8/1/2015

Submission Type: Continuing Review

Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non- Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research,

1138 Pearson

Hall, to officially close the project. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns

## APPENDIX H: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FORMS FOR INTERVIEW

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4566  
FAX 515 294-4267

**Date:** 11/24/2014

**To:** Angie Carter  
317B East Hall

**CC:** Dr. David Schweingruber  
404 East Hall  
Dr. Rebecca Christoffel  
339 Science II

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Navigating the Waters Interview Project

**IRB ID:** 14-527

**Approval Date:** 11/24/2014

**Date for Continuing Review:** 11/23/2015

**Submission Type:** New

**Review Type:** Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.