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Goat Walks, Scratch Baking and Pumpkin Cannons: Growing Agritourism on Ontario Farms

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of farms in Ontario are choosing to diversify into agritourism. Credited with bringing in extra farm income, agritourism also satisfies a growing consumer demand for local food and authenticity while on vacation. In this phenomenological study, the experiences of Ontario farm families were explored as they engaged in agritourism. It delved in-depth into the complex web of factors influencing agritourism start-up, and contextualized the essential structures and meanings held by various family members. The study elaborates upon, confirms, and challenges findings from previous studies on why farm families diversify into agritourism.

Keywords: agritourism, family farms, farm diversification, phenomenological approach, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The majority of farms in Ontario have increasingly become industrial and intensive agricultural growers producing food for commodity markets. The uptake of modern agriculture and agri-food systems since the 1950s has widened the gap between those growing food and consumers, and lead to the disappearance of features characterising traditional family farms. More recently, consumer awareness of, and interest in, local food and authenticity while on vacation has re-invigorated the desire to connect with farms and farmers. In response, the start-up of agritourism in particular has become a significant activity among autonomous and enterprising family farms within the province of Ontario in Canada.

The adoption of agritourism not only positions farms as attractive tourism destinations, but it helps offset the diminishing returns from conventional agriculture. In studies commissioned by the Ontario Farm Fresh Marketing Association (OFFMA), the number of Ontario family farms involved in agritourism has almost doubled in the last five years; a study in 2004 estimated 400 farms were involved in agritourism within the province with combined total revenue of \$116 million (Jayeff, 2005). By 2009, the number of farms had increased to 750 with annual sales in the \$210 million range (Experience Renewal Solutions, 2009).

Although agritourism is growing in popularity, we do not fully understand its impact on farming practices or the family farm. Is agritourism really saving the family farm? Does

agritourism help or hinder in presenting a realistic picture of current farming practices? Or, alternatively, does agritourism on the family farm contribute to new ways of defining and experiencing rural areas?

This study explored the experiences of family farm members as they engaged in agritourism. Unlike previous agritourism studies, which have tended to take a purely economic perspective, this study starts from the premise that the decision to embrace agritourism is motivated by a complex and intertwined web of factors. Such a premise is critical for moving the discourse forward on the future of the family farm in rural communities and the role tourism may take in that future.

BACKGROUND

Farms have become attractive tourist destinations because many visitors are nostalgic for a simpler time. Agritourists are looking to escape the hustle of the city, to connect with their cultural heritage, to spend time with their families, and to enjoy rich and authentic leisure experiences. As food production and distribution becomes of greater public concern, consumers are also looking to re-connect with where their food comes from. The local food movement in particular is increasing interest in visiting farms and partaking in farm experiences.

Starting from a somewhat dated description provided by the Canadian Agritourism Working Group (CATWG), agritourism has often been viewed as synonymous with rural tourism: “agritourism refers to travel which combines rural settings with products of agricultural operations – all within a tourism experience that is paid for by visitors” (Williams, Lack & Smith, 2004, p. 4). In contrast, others have suggested that agritourism is a distinct rural tourism niche characterized by its occurrence on a working farm and not just in a rural location (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Che, 2010; Fennell & Weaver, 1997; Phillip, Hunter & Blackstock, 2010). It has even been speculated that “in the future the term agritourism will be used more frequently than rural tourism” (Sznajder, Przeborska & Scrimgeour, 2009, p. 6). Further, the range and types of agritourism activities developed in a particular rural locale is directly determined by the traditional characteristics of an area and its farm heritage (Mendoza, 2008; Phillip *et al.*, 2010; Sznajder *et al.*, 2009). In Ontario, farms involved in agritourism add pick-your-own operations, farm tours, farm stores and scratch bakeries, or more staged “agritainment” activities (e.g., corn mazes, haunted barns, farm animal petting areas, or shows) to complement existing agricultural operations, such as growing commercial fruits, cash cropping, or raising livestock. Unlike other areas, farm-stays are almost non-existent within the province. Agritourism businesses in Ontario are heavily dependent on day-trippers and operate seasonally, generally between mid-summer (start of strawberry season) and the end of the fall (Experience Renewal Solutions, 2009; Jayeff, 2004).

The addition of agritourism on family farms is usually perceived as a strategy to overcome the challenges and changes happening in conventional agriculture. Extant studies have concluded one of the predominant motives for farms diversifying into tourism is economic. For example, such studies have indicated agritourism: brings in extra household income, saves the farm, provides employment opportunities for family members, and better utilizes on-farm resources (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001;

Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007). However, some studies have begun to allude to a more complex web of factors beyond purely economic considerations as influencing the start-up and operation of agritourism on farms (Machum, 2005; McGehee, Kim & Jennings, 2007; Mendoza, 2008; Schroder, 2004). A better understanding of these factors would be beneficial for policy- and decision-makers. Hence, to that end, the purpose of this study was to explore the complex web of factors through the experiences of family farm members as they engaged in agritourism.

METHOD

Setting the stage

As researchers have become more aware of the complexity of issues and factors at the root of the farm family's decision to diversify into agritourism, they have begun to recognize too, the limitations of traditional survey methodologies in delving more deeply into this complex web. Hence, to better understand the lived experiences of family farm members who started and embraced agritourism and to more fully appreciate the intertwined and complex nature of factors involved in those experiences, a more interpretative approach was required. By using an approach rooted in phenomenology, meaningful experiences and essential structures associated with the phenomenon of agritourism, from the perspective of the involved members on the family farm, can be explored. Phenomenology is especially well suited for investigating the gaps between real-life occurrences and theoretical concepts on the one hand and individual's interpretations of these occurrences on the other (Berglund, 2007; Smith, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Ontario farm families starting and operating agritourism enterprises. In particular the family dimension, the dynamics and relationships within the family were explored in-depth as these farm families diversified and operated agritourism on their farm. This exploration focused on the personal experiences of farm family members and what led to the decision to engage in agritourism; how easy or difficult the transition was; what the experience has been like since the decision was made; what challenges they continue to face; and what does the family think about its future. To this end, two principal research questions guided the study:

1. How do family members describe their experiences with agritourism on the family farm?
2. To what extent has the farm changed since the introduction of agritourism and what do the families feel will happen with their farms in the future?

By privileging the individual experiences of farm family members, a specific approach to phenomenology pioneered in psychology by Smith and his colleagues (2009), called *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA), was adopted. Guided by IPA, the study embraced the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology as well as its specific methods in order to address some of the shortcomings recently identified about the use of phenomenological approaches in tourism research (Szarycz, 2009).

The sample

The sample for this study was determined through a two-step process. First, a short-list of member farms was recommended by the Executive Director of OFFMA which had established

and successfully operated agritourism enterprises on their ancestral farms. Further, farms which were currently considering and/or pursuing farm succession were included. Based on these preliminary criteria, a list of ten potential farms for inclusion in this study was provided by OFFMA. Second, each one of the candidate farms was ranked and prioritized based on four additional criteria:

1. The extent to which the working farm is combined with agritourism;
2. The length of tenure the family has had on this particular piece of farmland;
3. The operation involves at least two generations of the farm family; and
4. The operating season of the agritourism operation (i.e., if the enterprise is operated year-round or only during the peak season from mid-summer to the end of the fall).

Based on these criteria, the three top-ranked farms (i.e., those farms most engaged in agritourism) were selected to be part of the study. The agritourism principals at each of the three farms were contacted to elicit their interest and willingness to participate. In case of refusal, the next farm on the prioritized list was contacted until three agritourism principals or farm sites agreed to take part in the study. Unlike past agritourism studies, where only the farmers or agritourism principals were involved, this study included all adult family members at each of the participating farm sites. Given the phenomenological perspective taken to this study, it was imperative to seek input and understand the experiences of as many members of the farm families as possible. This meant that both those family members active in managing the farm and the agritourism enterprise, as well as those family members who were not activity involved were included in the study. In total, 17 people from three farms participated in the study.

Data collection

Data were collected from each farm site in two phases. In the first phase, an initial farm visit and tour was undertaken which was exploratory in nature in order to become familiar with operations on the farm as well as to be introduced to the members of the family. During this first phase, data were collected through observations captured in a reflective research journal (Fade, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2009). The second phase of the data collection was face-to-face active interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003) with each member of the farm family. Active interviews were selected as the protocol because they are social encounters where knowledge and meaning are constructed collaboratively and the production of meaning is as important as the meaning produced. Where possible, the first interview with the agritourism principal was conducted on the same day as the initial farm visit. Interviews with the other members of the family occurred on separate occasions when it was convenient for each member who agreed to participate in the study.

Each interview began with a simple question – “Can you tell me the story of how your family got into agritourism?” From there, the interviews ebbed and flowed to explore three general areas– getting into agritourism, day-to-day operations, and future aspirations or visions for the farm. The interviews were all audio-taped and each was transcribed verbatim. Notably, data collection and analysis overlapped considerably within this particular study. In addition, a reflective research journal was kept throughout the data collection process in which additional observations and insights from the farm visits and the interviews were captured. The journal also served to document the actual research process followed and to record personal

impressions, opinions, and thoughts. Consistent with the notion of reflexivity, these impressions served to guard against personal biases influencing the meanings offered by the participants while also being a place to critically reflect upon the practice as a researcher (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Data analysis

Adhering to Smith *et al.*'s (2009) strategies laid out for conducting data analysis within IPA, the following steps were taken:

1. Read and re-read the raw transcripts and listen to the audio-taped interviews to get a sense of the whole.
2. Review the transcripts line-by-line to identify specific ways each person talks about, understands, and thinks about the experience in order to derive exploratory comments and to establish meaning units.
3. In working with the meaning units, develop emergent themes.
4. Search for connections across emergent themes.
5. Move onto the next transcript and repeat steps 1 through 4 for each participant interviewed independently.
6. Look for patterns across cases.
7. Carry out independent audits to establish validity and to be transparent about the actual process followed.

Phenomenological analysis is characterized by a set of common *processes* (i.e., moving from the individual to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative) and *principals* (i.e., understanding participants' point of view and meaning-making) that are applied flexibly. The use of phenomenology places the participants in context – each individual in relationship to the farm, the other family members, and the agritourism enterprise. The IPA framework allowed for data to be organized so that they could be traced back to the individual participants, as narratives from within the whole.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in three sections reflecting the key areas of the study: why families diversified their farms into agritourism, the challenges associated with the day-to-day operations, and finally, the family's aspirations for the future.

Getting into Agritourism

Extant studies on what motivates farmers to get into agritourism have predominantly suggested economic reasons, such as to generate extra income, provide employment for family members, and to better utilize resources. Other studies have alluded to other possible reasons why family farms get into agritourism, and while some are grounded in economics, others are related to social factors, lifestyle choices, and external pressures. Yet, as Ollenburg and Buckley (2007) suggest, these other reasons have not been fully explored. Although economic considerations were often spoken of during the interviews, family members also spoke about other, related factors. For instance, this participant points out the need to turn a profit, but with something you enjoy doing:

I hate to use the word romantic but there's something about this retailing farm that was really attractive to us. We enjoyed that part but it gets to the point where you've got to make money at it too. You can't just do something because you enjoy doing it. (Farm C)

At other points during our conversations, this participant from Farm C further highlighted he and his wife enjoyed interacting with customers: *"I like dealing with people, I like having a bit of fun with people when they come in. Visiting with them."* He also made reference to observing the perceived success of other farms running agritourism:

You get into it because you're looking at your neighbour and you see a hundred cars there on a Saturday. You think wow; he's just making a ton of money! (Farm C)

Observing the success of others in agritourism was also a contributing factor for another family farm participating in this study.

Another factor cited was the need to expand the farm operation so it could adequately support multiple family members at the same time:

He [one of the sons] decided he was going to come back home from university and work on the farm full time. His dad said to give us both an income to live off or you're going to have to come up with your own shtick. (Farm A)

At none of the farms was the sole purpose for starting the agritourism enterprise entirely attributable to economics. Time and again, the participants identified a combination of reasons for why their farm diversified into agritourism. Indeed, the motive of economics appeared to be somewhat superficial; rather, farm family members who were the actual instigators of agritourism activities on their farms expressed an interest in doing something new, and wanted to get out of conventional farming. At some instances, the new enterprises allowed them an opportunity to integrate others skills or interests while keeping the family on the farm. For the younger generation coming back and working on the farm, these new businesses provided wonderful opportunities for them to integrate new skills, talents, and responsibilities.

What became very clear throughout this study is that the decision to diversify into agritourism was not a single decision made independent of other considerations, but rather, family farms become agritourism attraction through a process of evolution. This evolution was attributable to numerous smaller decisions, made by various members of the farm family over a considerable period of time, usually years. The principal with this farm helps us understand that getting into agritourism was not an overnight transition for most:

That's the thing you'll find. Farms rarely just jumped in and dump up to a million dollars [to get started in agritourism]. No one really has that much to put in. (Farm A)

The evolution of agritourism on the farm is captured in this quotation by the father at one of the farms:

Initially it started off as a small pick your own where people came and picked the vegetables they wanted. And then it evolved to be willing to pay for them. Once it evolves to that then you're trying to think of other ways that are complementary when they're here to draw them here and keep them here. I think the whole Halloween and Thanksgiving market is what I think of as the agritourism end of it. We'd run a fall festival and people would come for more than just getting their vegetables and going home. That's what it evolved into once we had the building here. (Farm C)

In fact, agritourism businesses not only evolved during start-up, but most participants recognized that the attractions and products being offered for paying visitors must also continue to change from one year to the next.

The farm has just grown, every year we add something. People they do kinda look for us to change now too. We are feeding them that. They see other places that aren't and I think we've become their first choice because we are evolving. (Farm A)

Agritourism businesses are flexible – they grow and change over time. In some instances, this is in response to increasing numbers of visitors, rising revenues, family changes, and in other cases, the decision is made to get rid of various activities because they are too much hassle, too much work, or simply not profitable. For example, one of the farms gave up their haunted barn and wagon ride themed attraction because it was too much work even though it did bring in a lot of people and profitable returns. At another farm, they decided to close down their farm market completely for about eight years because they felt stretched between raising their young family, farming their conventional crops (which were also providing strong returns), and managing the seasonal agritourism business. For this family, the decision was to temporarily close the agritourism business until someone in the family expressed an interest and made the time necessary to run it well.

In sum, once the transition to agritourism occurs, it is paramount to recognize that family farms are in a continuous state of change and they adapt from year to year – they are not stagnant enterprises. Consequently, if we are to truly support family farms as they transition into new, non-agricultural businesses, we must look beyond the initial decision and focus greater attention on the smaller, more incremental steps that lead them into agritourism and that continue to prompt them to evolve. Supporting farms that choose to diversify into agritourism, therefore, is not a one-time, at start-up proposition; rather, support should be seen as a longer-term commitment that requires different types and levels of business and family supports and mechanisms throughout the evolution and life of the agritourism operation.

Daily Operations

Any new enterprise introduced on the farm must generate revenue and eventually be profitable. In the end, these are for-profit businesses. The considerable effort needed to operate

agritourism enterprises was emphasized throughout the conversations with the participating families. The one family that had made the decision to stop operating their farm market for a number of years did so in part because they were uncomfortable with the idea of hiring a full-time farm market manager. Even though it might have resulted in freeing them from the daily operational commitment related to running the agritourism business, they did not feel any of their employees at the time shared their vision for the business. Farm A's parents spoke about weighing the pros and cons when they first considered getting into pick-your-own berries. However, once the decision was made, they felt you had to be 100% accountable to your customers.

One of the major challenges that the farm families encountered concerned whether or not they should charge for admission, and if so, what amount to charge. This seemed to be a pivotal decision that marked the transition into agritourism. It was, at times, the point when differing opinions held by the conventional farmer in the family and the business person clashed:

The hardest thing probably a farmer learns to do is price....uhmm.... To charge enough... We had a play area and there wasn't much in it. Ahhumm... The animals were always around and she[his wife] always wanted to charge for it and I fought it for years,uhmm, on the basis if you're going to charge then you gotta have something there to charge for. And, I didn't think the animals were anything to charge for because they were just there. It was to...an attraction, you know, for the kids so if you're going to buy sweet corn, so let's go to [Farm B] to buy sweet corn because we can go see the animals - it's free. Rather than go to my competitor up the road, the animals here were theoretically to be a drawing card. Ahh, and part of it was if we started charging for the animals then mothers would go a different way and go to a competitor to get their corn and their stuff because they don't want to pay for the kids to see the animals. If the kids are small, they'll re-route them a different road and say "Oh we missed the road today we'll go another day." So that will satisfy the kids. So that was my major concern...That's the way I saw it. My wife on the other hand saw that people were getting something for nothing and that wasn't right...haa,haa...(Farm B)

Beyond making the leap from being a price taker to a price maker, many of the operators of the agritourism enterprises spoke about the lack of personal space that resulted. In fact, some of the participants even described their feelings about becoming part of the tourism experience. To protect their personal space, families described ways they had intentionally created a separation between themselves and the agritourism enterprises. For instance, Farm C built their new farm market building separate from the house, and planted a cedar hedgerow between the farm market and their home. One or two spoke of the possibility of living off the farm at some point. In contrast, other participants took on personas or characters while they were working, often wearing a costume. While in the costume, they were "on" and working:

He's got this persona during the fall festival People walk past him and they're like, "Farmer Joe". It's hilarious. You're like your own little cartoon. (Farm A)

The families, their personal lives, and living spaces can become part of the overall tourism experience, and this became very apparent in discussions with family members. Agritourism enterprises on working farms are effectively embedded in the family's home. In describing the overlap between personal and business spaces, the spouse on one farm who did not grow up on a farm, expressed how much time it took her to become comfortable with customers having picnics on the front porch of the farmhouse or even peeking in the windows. A technique planned to make customers feel self-conscious about snooping actually backfired, and ultimately, turned into another attraction on their farm:

We are the farm. Even if I don't want those people on the front porch, I think "No, it's all good, you stay as long as you want". Hopefully they'll clean up their garbage. It took some getting used to and that being said I do mess with them as well. We have this really creepy mannequin. So we dress her up in different outfit and we'll put her in the window. People will literally come and peek in the window! I'll be on the computer and there will be someone right there looking in the window. They want to look at the house. If I catch someone I'm like, "you can come in. It's a mess but come on in". So people started to know this mannequin. One year I hadn't put her out yet and people started asking about her. We call her Tina so everyone looks to see where Tina is in the house. (Farm A)

In all of these cases, there were multiple businesses being run simultaneously on the farms. Further, the potential for other innovative businesses or new attractions being added was usually raised by the participants as opportunities being seriously considered with other members of the families, or with friends, neighbours, or employees. An entrepreneurial spirit certainly seems to be thriving amongst these family farms. These findings suggest that successful agritourism enterprises should be given strong consideration as possible sites for rural business incubators where new businesses could be encouraged and nurtured.

Future Aspirations

When talking with the participants about what they saw or thought about the future of the farm, all were very optimistic. Future aspirations were clearly connected to the belief that the farm would be kept within the family and that agritourism would play a large part in its future. Agritourism was seen as a means of preserving the farmland and heritage of the farm for the next generation as well as future generations beyond that.

There were instances where modern farming practices have made it more difficult for families to plan for succession on the farm. For instance, in speaking with the father from Farm A, he reflected on his own experience of coming back to the farm and taking over from his father some 35 years ago and how different farming is today:

This is part of the problem, at 65 my Dad was ready to retire. Farming was hard for his generation. But here I am in relatively good health, a few aches and pains to worry about, but it's still fun to wake up. When my dad was ready to retire, he said, "if you want it, I'll sign" that's the conversation we had. (Farm A)

The father from Farm B spoke about never retiring while he recounted the failed attempt with one of his sons to put a succession plan in place a few years earlier and the current plans occurring with one of the daughters:

I'll never retire but less and less be involved. Probably not starting for another five years. [Our youngest daughter] as you know is the one that appears that she's going to take it over. She's shown an interest. We went through this succession planning with one of my sons and it fell through. Then [youngest daughter] showed...stepped up. I have another daughter that's very interested.... in it as well. But [the youngest daughter] is probably the choice... I didn't have a choice, she was the one who came forward first after my son...After that part of it fell through. So we went with that. All things happen for a reason. [Our youngest daughter] is trying to take over in here [the bakery & retail area] if Mother would back off. Mother's finding it hard to back off. (Farm B)

Discussions about the future of the farm often turned to the issue of intergenerational transfer of the farm. Many of the parents struggle with how the farm and its businesses will ultimately be divided up amongst their children. Discussions about equality and fairness dominated the conversations with the parents. They often confided that it was more important to assist their children as young adults than to worry about what they were left with in the end. One mother described this feeling with a great story about waiters. Her story captured how it is more important to help their children get established as adults by helping them pay for their education, giving them a down payment on a first home, getting them established in a new business venture, or even transferring the farm.

A young couple goes into a lawyer's office the lawyer says "Well what do you do for a living?" "Well, we're waiters". "Where do you wait", asks the lawyer. "We're waiting for our parents to die". I don't think my kids are waiters. They all have good jobs. They're all doing well. They'll be glad to have something but what are they going to do with it? So we just help them now. (Farm A)

Transition and succession of the family farm is never easy. With modernization of farming practices, older members of the family are able to keep themselves actively involved, which blurs the transition period even more, as they seem more reluctant to retire as their fathers and mothers did only some 30 to 40 years earlier. Further, the start-up and operations of new non-agricultural enterprises on the farm, such as agritourism, have created the potential for keeping younger family members engaged in the farm by adding new roles and responsibilities. At the same time, the new businesses add more flexible and new roles able to accommodate everyone in the family on the farm itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary findings from the study suggest that starting agritourism on family farms is done only in part for economic reasons. More importantly, the growth of agritourism has been very organic, usually starting with a road-side stand or stall at a local farmers' market, and then expanding over time into significant capital investments in infrastructure and buildings at the

farm itself. Beyond purely economic considerations, family farms in Ontario are diversifying into agritourism based on other motives such as a deep seated desire to continue a chosen way of life on the farm, wanting to interact with people, and simply being entrepreneurial. An over-arching theme linking these families' motives is a need to maintain their independence as traditional farm families and to remain tied to the land. Clearly, wanting to remain farmers in uncertain agrarian times and to make a decent living from the land continues to drive a spirit of innovation as farm families evolve and seek new opportunities being offered through tourism.

The findings of this study may help in identifying how tourism agencies (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Regional Tourism Organizations, CATWG), small business development organizations, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, and rural municipalities might best support farm families as they transition out of a predominantly agrarian economy into service-based or experience-based economies. The personal narratives, in a sense, put flesh and muscle on the skeletal bones of the fragmented and disembodied laundry list of possible factors leading farm families to engage in agritourism. As government resources and program funding for agriculture continue to decrease and strategies for increasing tourism and rural entrepreneurship increase, the value of knowing and appreciating the lived experience of farm families becomes paramount. Policy and decision makers at all levels of government now have personal impressions and stories from those individuals who have independently transitioned from a predominately agrarian economy into new opportunities found in tourism. From this information, they can better recognize the value contributed by farm families to local rural economies – such as increased taxes, job creation, new business developments, and rural resiliency – and identify ways to support other farms in their transition and subsequent success.

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