



Age and Roles on the Family Farm

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Abstract

Age is a factor that has been analyzed in the workforce for quite some time now. The aging process is universal and found in daily lives throughout the work force or labor market, but some factors of age are different in the agriculture industry. This paper aims to acknowledge and explore the aging process specifically found in the agriculture industry. The key concepts of this paper have been broken into four different topics. These topics include youth roles on the farm, mid-adult roles on the farm, older adult roles on the farm, and public policy implications dealing with the agriculture industry. The research question that will be addressed is as follows: How does age impact the roles of those working on family farms?

Keywords: aging, rural sociology, rural development, public policy

Age is a factor that has been analyzed in the workforce for quite some time now. The aging process is universal and found in daily lives throughout the work force or labor market, but some factors of age are different in the agriculture industry. This paper aims to acknowledge and explore the aging process specifically found in the agriculture industry. The key concepts of this paper have been broken into four different topics. These topics include youth roles on the farm, mid-adult roles on the farm, older adult roles on the farm, and public policy implications dealing with the agriculture industry. The research question that will be addressed is as follows: How does age impact the roles of those working on family farms?

Before addressing the main claim of this paper, there are some key terms that need to be defined. These definitions will allow for easier comprehension of this paper and the literature that was collected. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a family farm as “a farm in which the majority of the business is owned by the operator and individuals related to the

operator by blood, marriage, or adoption, including relatives who do not live in the operator household” (USDA 2020). The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics considers the agriculture industry as “establishments primarily engaged in growing crops, raising animals, harvesting timber, and harvesting fish and other animals from a farm, ranch, or their natural habitats” (BLS 2021). Further definitions of each age group (youth, mid-adults, and older adults) are listed in the accompanying paragraphs below. Lastly, the principal farm operator is “the person who runs the farm, making day to day decisions” (USDA 2020).

Youth Roles on the Farm

Youth often play a significant role on the family farm. For the purpose of this literature review, youth are being defined as those who are between the ages of ten and nineteen. Young adults are an important component on the family farm as “nearly a million youth are estimated to live on U.S. farms or ranches, and over a quar-

ter-million youth are hired workers on these operations” (Zagel et. al. 2019). Youth on family farms learn about farm tasks, farm expectations and farm safety from their fathers (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016). Young adults become responsible for farm tasks and chores that tend to be more dangerous than chores a child not growing up on a farm would have (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016). Male youth are expected to eventually end up with the transfer of farmland or farm ownership, which can put added pressure to perform efficiently (Conway et al. 2019). This pressure in farming expectations can often lead to youth farm injuries, as discussed below.

Youth Expectations

As children grow up on family farms, they are expected to participate in farm activities and chores. There was little research gathered about youth roles and expectations alone. However, there was a great deal of information on youth farm risk behaviors. The risk behaviors that can be used to assume the roles of youth on the family farm. Jinnah and Stoneman (2016) find that farm youth were participating in tasks such as operating a tractor and PTO (Personal Time Off) system, operating other powerful farm equipment, caring for livestock, and assisting fathers and grandfathers with other farm-related tasks. One study found that teens worked an average of 16.95 hours per week on the farm, the same as a part-time job for some children as young as ten years old (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016).

Youth Safety

A common theme from multiple studies of youth on the family farm involved youth safety. Various research studies found that there is a lack of safety on family farms when it comes to youth experiences. Zagel and others found that there were an estimated 279,279 farm-related injuries in youth between the years 2001 and 2014. They also found that the majority of these farm injuries could have been prevented had proper safety protocols been followed. "As there are no national farming safety training requirements for youth, any safety protocols are then learned from their parents." (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016). Parents make the call about what tasks the child is capable of doing and at what age, which often leads

to youth participating in dangerous farming tasks with little safety training. It is also known that youth learn from watching their parents operate or complete tasks where safety is often ignored or seen as a common-sense topic (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016). Jinnah and Stoneman (2016) also found that “youth unsafe farm behaviors increased with their exposure to farm work” or in other words, the more hours worked on the farm, the more likely youth were to engage in risky farming behaviors. Many researchers on this topic urged those in the agriculture industry to have conversations about farm safety as a way to decrease the danger and injuries in U.S. farming youth.

Mid-Adult Roles on the Farm

Middle aged adults on the family farm are often the primary operators, parents of youth, and children of older adults. Those who fall into this category within the agriculture industry are often doing the most work on the family farm, with farming being their full-time occupation (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016). Most women also worked outside of the family farm, which allows for an interesting concept of the family farm version of the ‘second shift’ experienced by women. Men in this category had an average of 25.84 years of farming experience and women in this category had an average of 18.62 years experience (Jinnah and Stoneman 2016).

Family and Work Merge

An interesting factor about family farms is that their work and home are typically in the same place. This also means that family life and work life often merge. Most farms in the United States are considered to be family farms (Paskewitz and Beck 2017). When the social institutions of both family and work begin to merge, there are three prominent outcomes. These outcomes are intragroup conflict (Paskewitz and Beck 2017), dual earner families which may also include off-farm employment (Beach and Kulcsar 2015), and the division of labor based upon gender roles (Contzen and Forney 2017).

Intragroup conflict and family communication patterns look different in family farm households than

in other households. On family farms, “shared communication patterns are created within a culture valuing privacy, competition, and independence” (Paskewitz and Beck 2017). These specific values affect communication patterns because farm families tend to prefer passive communication, nonverbal communication, and learned assumptions (Paskewitz and Beck 2017). These forms of communication lead to greater intragroup conflict between the family including conflict between spouses, conflict between parents and children, and conflict between siblings. Paskewitz and Beck (2017) found that open communication allows for less conflict in the family system. However, other research also found that when considering family farms “family members rarely bring up conflicts to the other party; rather, they keep their frustration to themselves or wait until things boil over” (Waters 2013).

Another concept to consider when work and family merge is the idea of off-farm employment. The participation in off-farm work is not uncommon in modern farming families (Beach and Kulcsar 2015). Some reasons for the incorporation of off-farm employment include “financial pressure on farmers to seek additional income” and the increase of non-traditional farmers in the United States (Beach and Kulcsar 2015). A new family farm structure is built when family members also work off-farm in a different setting. Many middle-aged adults in the agriculture industry will fall into this category of working both on the farm and having off-farm employment.

Gender Roles

The agriculture industry is heavily gendered, with most primary farmer operators in the United States being men (Horst and Marion 2019). Research by Contzen and Forney (2017) found that the division of farm labor was gendered, where men do more outside, and farm machinery work and women do more caring for livestock, produce, or offer other forms of support. The structure of family farms and the division of labor are important to consider when looking at the future of the agriculture industry. While it is still more common to find a male farmer than a female farmer, the number of female farmers is on the rise in the United States (Ball

2014). Ball (2014) cites one major reason for the gender division in the agriculture industry: most of the labor in the agriculture industry is not controlled by the formal labor market and instead is based on self-employment on family-ran farms. This reduces formal accusations of gender inequality in the agriculture industry. The increase of females in the agricultural industry is already apparent through many social media platforms such as *Farmher* and *Farm Babe*. Women who fall into the middle-aged range of farmers are in the process of reforming the structure and institution of farming through the labor process.

Older Adult Roles on the Farm

Older adults play a valuable and time-honored role on family farms, as it is likely they grew up in the agriculture industry with all the farming secrets. Many farmers in this category maintain a sense of “territoriality and shared pride in place” on the family farm as they age (Downey, Threlkeld, and Warburton 2017). This idea of territoriality and generational pride are some of the key factors that lead to older adults staying on the farm as they continue to age. The age of farmers in the United States has also been on the rise, with the average age of the U.S. farmer being 58.3 years old (Tauer 2018). Older adult roles on the farm fall into three major intertwined categories. These categories are the retirement process, the role of advisor, and the transfer of farm ownership to the next family farm owner.

Retirement

Place identity impacts older farming adult’s retirement considerations (Downey, Threlkeld, and Warburton 2017). Downey and colleagues (2017) found instances where men were attached to the farmland through patrilineal connections, which affected the retirement process for many farming couples. Similarly, the idea of “couplesness” or shared identities between farming couples was lacking. Men tended to focus on the male intergenerational lineage, whereas women were marginalized and considered passive in the retirement process (Downey, Threlkeld, and Warburton 2017). Unfortunately, there was very little additional literature available about the re-

tirement process for women on the family farm. Conway (2019) and others find that “most elderly farmers opt to maintain the facade of normal day to day activity and behavior instead of retiring.” This aversion towards the retirement process for older adult farmer leads into the next role: the role of advisor.

Role of Advisor

As older adults on the farm leave the laborious working phase they enter into the role of advisor on the farm. Tauer (2018) finds that there is a “concave relationship between age and productivity where there is first an increase and then a decrease in productivity as the age of the farmer increases.” This decrease in productivity, which could be due to capital not being replenished, failure to adapt to new technology, or age effects that come along with being an older person (Tauer 2018). However, this decrease in productivity allows for the next generation of farmers to transition into the role of principal farm operator, leaving the older adult farmers to take on a different leadership role. Gostin (2019) argues that there is another way to think of aging, a way which “values life’s experiences”.

Gostin (2019) also encourages others to consider “What if we empowered older people to ‘give back’ by mentoring or tutoring the young...?” This question is completely applicable within the agriculture industry. The younger and mid-adult generations, through their work on the family farm, empower the older adults to take on the mentorship role. Likewise, the youth and mid-adults benefit from the teaching of lifelong skills, trades, and expertise from older adults. This cycle helps the family farm process to succeed, allowing for healthy aging across all areas of the family farm operation.

Transfer of Farm Ownership

One of the primary roles of older adults in the agriculture industry is the transfer of farm ownership. Most older adults are interested in preserving the family farm by passing on farmland and farming operations to the next generation through male lineage (Downey, Threlkeld, and Warburton 2017). Those in the agriculture industry that fall into the older adult’s category serve as mentors “tutoring the young, using lifelong

skills” (Gostin 2019). There is great value placed on the life experiences of older farming adults as they are not only passing land, machinery, or other tangible farming items, but also skills, life lessons, and talents onto the next generation of family farmers. Approximately 10% of the farmland in the United States will be entering a transition phase in the next five years (Gasparini 2017). The transfer of farm ownership is changing due to modern implications, such as public policy, as discussed in the following section.

Public Policy in the Agriculture Industry

Public policy in the agriculture industry is currently experiencing a multitude of transitions as the next generation of family farmers is coming in. Part of this is due to the baby boomer generation making its exit out of the agriculture industry. The modern agriculture industry is also beginning to incorporate differing business models and technology. This leads to more policies around safety, discrimination, labor, and government funding. Conway and others (2019) find that it is worthwhile to “understand and acknowledge the world as farmers perceive it” so that future generational agricultural policy can be better informed for all farmers.

Conclusion

It is clear that along with age comes distinct roles on the family farm. Youth on family farms are expected to participate in weekly farm tasks. Mid-adults are responsible for the safety and most operations on the family farm. Older adults serve in an advisory role, retire, and oversee a transfer of farm ownership (Conway et al. 2019). Farm roles change as age changes. The aging experience in the agriculture industry looks different from the aging experience in an urban labor market.

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