



Engaging the tensions of ecological internships: Considerations for agroecology and sustainable food systems movements

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ecological farm internships and the implications for agroecology and food systems' sustainability. Drawing on over 60 interviews with farmers and interns in Ontario, Canada, I show that internships offer hands-on learning opportunities to perspective farmers and food systems advocates unavailable through formal institutions. At the same time, many farmers rely on interns as non-waged workers to meet seasonal and labor-intensive production needs. This creates a dynamic tension where internships can simultaneously be innovative models of experiential education and unjust forms of exploitative labor. Engaging these tensions remains a fundamental challenge for the future of agroecology and sustainable food systems movements.

KEYWORDS

Agroecology; education; internships; new farmers; non-wage labor

Introduction

Important concerns have been raised about the long-term trajectory of the agricultural sector in Canada including the increasing average age of the producers, farmers, and their families choosing to leave the farm and a declining number of new entrants (Beaulieu 2015). This is paralleled by the popularity and impact of sustainable food movements with growing demands for healthy, local food produced through socially just and sustainable practices (Levkoe 2014). As part of these movements, agroecology has been recognized as integral to building sustainable food systems and an alternative to corporate-led, industrial modes of food production (Altieri 2009; Gliessman 2013). Despite this enthusiasm, there are limited options for agroecological training and education available to new farmers. As Niewolny and Lillard (2010) noted, "Beginning farmer training and program development is perhaps one of the most significant yet poorly understood areas of agriculture and food system research and practice" (68). In Canada, while conventional

agricultural training tends to be rooted in formal education programs through universities and colleges, there is little understanding of informal agroecological training offered directly on farms.

Recent studies have confirmed that internships are proliferating across North America and have become a prominent way that aspiring agroecological farmers learn their trade (Ekers et al. 2016; Endres and Armstrong 2014; Hamilton 2011). In a typical internship model, individuals receive training, accommodation, meals, and in some cases, a small stipend in return for their labor, to support the host farm over the growing season. Drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with ecological¹ farmers and interns in Ontario, Canada, this paper investigates the perceived values and limitations of internships as a predominant form of education and training as well as the implications for agroecology and sustainable food systems. Research findings build on a related study conducted by Ekers et al. (2016) to show that internships can offer unique hands-on, experiential learning opportunities to perspective farmers and sustainable food systems advocates that are unavailable through formal institutions. At the same time, many farmers rely on interns as non-waged² workers to meet seasonal and labor-intensive production needs. This creates a dynamic tension where internships can simultaneously be innovative models of experiential agroecology education and unjust forms of exploitative labor.

Based on my analysis, I argue that hands-on, farm-based education is essential, however, the current models of non-waged internships present fundamental challenges for the future of agroecology and sustainable food systems. Engaging these tensions is vital because, as Gliessman (2016) rightly suggested of agroecology, “it’s not the destination, it’s the journey” (894). In other words, it is crucial to ensure that the processes in which producers and advocates are trained and educated is tied to the core values of the broader agroecological project. As internships proliferate, they represent a defining trend that may be unaligned with principles of social, ecological and environmental justice. In Canada, there has not been widespread adoption of agroecology, yet it is these ecological farmers and interns that are actively engaging with the theory and practice as individuals and through their networks. Thus, there is a fundamental need to address the tensions of internships as part of nascent agroecology and sustainable food systems movements. I begin by situating the practices of internships within the context of agroecology and sustainable food systems followed by a

¹The term “ecological farming” is used to describe the farms in this study because it is widely used by the farmers and interns themselves to describe their activities. They use this term to refer to various philosophical and practical applications of technical and experiential knowledge that include agroecology, biodynamics, certified and non-certified organics, natural, permaculture, etc.

²The term “non-waged” refers to arrangements where individuals are paid less than the legal minimum wage. In some cases, interns are provided financial compensation for their work, but in almost all instances, compensation is provided outside a formal wage relation.

presentation of the research findings and focusing on perceptions of farmers and interns. I conclude with a discussion about the need to better engage the tensions presented by internships and highlight some key implications that evolve from this study as well as directions for future research and practice.

Agroecology and the rise of internships

Studies have demonstrated that small- to medium-scale agroecological farming can be more productive, efficient, and sustainable than large-scale industrial practices (UNCTAD, 2013; Rosset 1999). Gliessman (1997) describes the philosophy and science of agroecology as “the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agricultural ecosystems” (13). Beyond simply following a set of preordained production practices, these approaches are based on integrating social and ecological values with lived experiences and scientific research. For example, agroecology stresses the importance of recognizing the diverse benefits of agriculture beyond food production (Renting et al. 2009). Furthermore, agroecological approaches are developed and adapted based on the ecological characteristics of a particular bioregion in relation to the needs of the communities who inhabit the territory. In practice, this demands a combination of technical and traditional knowledge that cannot be learned solely from formal educational programs (Hassanein 1999; Østergaard et al. 2010): knowledge and skills are often shared through producer networks and passed between farmers to their children or trainees (Kroma 2006).

Many scholars and practitioners have also argued that agroecology is a central part of long-term food system sustainability because of its potential to develop alternatives outside of the dominant capitalist logic (Gliessman 2013; Jarosz 2008; Watts, Ilbery, and Maye 2005). At the International Forum on Agroecology held in Mali in February 2015, international delegates representing diverse organizations and global movements produced a declaration identifying agroecology as a response to the industrial agriculture and “a key form of resistance to an economic system that puts profit before life” (Declaration of the International Forum for Agroecology 2015).

These multiple perspectives speak directly to the ways that the growing field of agroecology has been described as a scientific discipline, agricultural practice and social movement (Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen 2013; Wezel et al. 2009). They explicitly link ecology, culture, and economics to agricultural production, healthy environments and viable food and farming communities (Horlings and Marsden 2011). Agroecological approaches are considered to be central to building sustainable food systems and are often shared through non-institutional activities and relationships.

According to Ngo and Brklacich (2014), a large portion of new agroecological farmers in North America come from urban, non-farming

backgrounds. With a lack of formal education and training programs, the internship model has become a predominant option for these aspiring farmers (Endres and Armstrong 2014; Niewolny and Lillard 2010).³ Beyond occupational skills, informal experiential education has been shown to play an important role in providing opportunities unavailable through formal institutions (Schugurensky and Mündel 2005) and can be a vital part of developing the necessary knowledge and competencies for citizen engagement and political participation (Levkoe 2006). In addition, existing studies on the motivations of new farmers confirm a widespread desire to be part of a growing social movement for creating more sustainable food futures (Hamilton 2011; MacAuley and Niewolny 2016; Ngo and Brklacich 2014).

For many farm operators in North America, finding and maintaining dependable workers presents a challenge due to the intensive physical labor requirements (e.g., limited mechanization) and the nature of farm work (e.g., seasonal fluctuation, long hours). Furthermore, the low profit margins from fresh produce and livestock make it difficult for small- to medium-scale farmers to employ workers on a full-time basis. While the use of undocumented and migrant labor has become commonplace on many conventional (Holms 2013) and organic farms (Gray 2014), recent studies suggest that non-wage labor in the form of internships is a growing feature among ecological farming operations (Kalyuzhny 2012; Terry 2014). Ekers and Levkoe (2016) argued that there has been a major shift in the demographic of new ecological farmers in Ontario: “As kinship labor has steadily declined over the last five decades, internships and volunteer positions have greatly expanded, to the point where there are currently several hundred ecological farms in the province of Ontario offering non-waged ‘farm experiences’” (180). To explore this phenomenon, Ekers et al. (2016) conducted a survey across the province of Ontario with ecological farmers hosting interns. They found that while there had been an overall decline in non-waged work throughout the agricultural sector, 65.5% of their labor force was comprised of non-waged workers. From this research, they suggest that interns are playing a key role in supporting financially vulnerable ecological farm operations.

While the increase in farming internships has been significant, there are surprisingly few academic studies on this growing phenomenon. The majority of the research addressing these issues has focused almost exclusively on short-term volunteer tourism through case studies of individuals seeking ‘socially meaningful’ vacation opportunities through World Wide

³Of note, there are a number of growing opportunities for experiential agroecological education within academia in the form of action-oriented research (Méndez, Bacon, and Cohen 2013) and action education (Lieblein, Østergaard, and Francis 2004). Further a number of university programs have developed agroecology farms that engage students, farmers and community members in hands-on experiential education. Two prominent examples include the UC Santa Cruz Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems (<http://casfs.ucsc.edu/>) and the University of British Columbia Centre for Sustainable Food Systems (<http://ubcfarm.ubc.ca>).

Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF). Different than internships which require longer-term and more integrated commitments and program structures, WWOOF is an international network that connects “volunteers with organic farmers and growers to promote cultural and educational experiences” (WWOOF, n.d.). Despite the differences between internships and volunteer tourism, there are some findings in this growing body of research that should be considered. Similar to interns, WWOOF hosts and volunteers are often motivated by a desire to engage in an interpersonal exchange of knowledge, skills and experiences (McIntosh and Bonnemann 2006; Yamamoto and Engelsted 2014), be a part of community-based social and economic development (Burns and Kondo 2015), and contribute to the advancement of sustainable food systems (Miller and Mair 2015; Terry 2014). Studies have also documented that many volunteers have transformational experiences through engagement with local communities, the natural environment and broader social change efforts (Ince 2015; Miller and Mair 2014; Mostafanezhad 2015; Terry 2014). Nevertheless, the primary motivation for most farmers involved in WWOOF is to reduce their labor costs (Yamamoto and Engelsted 2014; Terry 2014). Participating farmers also acknowledge that the efforts required to train, supervise and entertain short-term, inexperienced volunteers, often outweigh most anticipated labor-saving benefits. As a result of the dynamics between sustainable food systems goals and transitory non-waged labor schemes, critics have raised serious questions about the potential for WWOOF to be part of effective economic, social and environmental change efforts (Mostafanezhad et al. 2015).

Methods

This paper reports on research from a study in Ontario, Canada that examines the phenomenon of ecological farm internships and the implications for agroecology and sustainable food systems movements. The farms that were part of the sample population were involved in a range of self-described ecological practices (including biodynamic, certified and non-certified organic, natural, permaculture, etc.) and identified (either directly or indirectly) with the broad goals of social, ecological and economic sustainability. As an initial part of this research, Ekers et al. (2016) reported on a survey of ecological farms engaged in internship programs between December and March of 2013/2014 and 2014/2015. This paper expands on that survey to report on a series of in-depth interviews with ecological farmers ($n \sim 24$) and interns ($n \sim 36$) conducted toward the latter part of the growing season (between July and November) in 2014 and 2015. The interviews focused on understanding the different perspectives of individuals’ experiences and took place on the farms. In cases where interviews

were conducted with both farm owners and interns, discussions were held separately to ensure confidentiality.

The initial group of interviewees was chosen from the list of survey respondents who agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. The final selection involved an attempt to include a diversity of internship models based on farm location (e.g., region of the province, urban/rural), types of production (e.g., vegetable, meat, dairy, mixed), ecological practices (e.g., certified/non-certified, biodynamic, organic, in-transition), and net incomes. Additional farmers and interns were added to the initial list using snowball sampling methods to ensure a greater diversity in the sample population. For example, in the initial round of interviews with interns, many of the responses were extremely positive; negative experiences were referred to only through secondary accounts. As a result, we followed up with a number of individuals based on recommendations to include their experiences in the research. All interviews followed a standard questionnaire and were digitally recorded, transcribed and coded for recurrent themes using the NVIVO software. In the sections below, I present an overview and description of the major themes that emerged from the analysis, including key quotes that represent the general sentiments from respondents.

Perceived values of ecological internships

The interview findings highlighted the ways that internships exemplify overlapping, and at times, contradictory sets of material and ideological tendencies. I begin by describing the perceived values identified by respondents' comments about training a new generation of farmers, contributing to sustainable food systems advocacy, and providing opportunities for non-monetary exchange.

Training a new generation of farmers

Unanimously, respondents identified internships as an essential way to train a new generation of farmers. Noting the challenges of farm succession, one intern commented, "I'm interested in learning some techniques that are being passed down through the generations, [but this] is not a multigenerational farm... I feel like there is a lot of knowledge that's being lost". Most respondents believed that hands-on training where workers "learn-by-doing," is the only way to gain experience necessary for running an ecological farming operation. A number of farmers criticized formal education programs in relation to the "holistic" experiential education they were offering through internships. As opposed to the formal programs, one farmer explained,

I try pretty hard to take the time to give the context on why we're doing what we're doing and to offer workshops about various aspects of our farm business [such as] cover cropping, soil health, succession planting and crop rotations.

Similarly, an intern commented, "One thing I love about the farm is that it's not just theoretical and it's not just practice... it's great to learn the educational aspect and then to apply it." Another intern remarked, "There's just nothing like working next to somebody who knows their way around the dirt and farm equipment. It's a skill you are not going to read from a book."

For interns, the high tuition cost associated with formalized education programs was identified as a major barrier, while internships were described as being more accessible and offering a broader range of education and training opportunities, some of which were unavailable elsewhere. For example, interns pointed to the value of particular skills they acquired, such as working with draft horses, homesteading and direct-to-consumer marketing. One intern noted,

People pay money to take this sort of [training] from farmers with their experience. To get it for free, room and board and everything, I'm on the up compared to some people. There are schools where you can go and spend thousands of dollars to learn these things that for a little isolation, I'm learning. [I'm working] with farmers that have 40 years' experience—that's a lot of time.

For many interns, the high quality of education provided by farmers was identified as extremely valuable. One intern noted,

I learned so much from being on a farm that was managed well, financially successful (give or take a bit) and a place where the crops, the soil and the farmers weren't in crisis all the time, but were going about their farm plan exactly how they had written it down.

Another intern explained, "It was kind of like going to school for free ... I see this internship in the sense that I'm gaining knowledge in exchange for my labor."

Growing sustainable food systems advocates

For the majority of farmers in the sample population, the establishment of an ecological farm business was not solely focused on profit maximization and competition. Many named a wide range of values and rationalities driving their efforts that included sustainable lifestyle choices, building connections to their communities, local economic development, ecological stewardship and social and environmental justice. This is concurrent with other studies that have identified farmers being influenced by a multiplicity of

motivational goals, with profit maximization being only one (Howley, Dillon, and Hennessy 2013; Koontz 2001). For example, one farmer commented,

Our goal is to destroy the industrial food system, to advance organic agriculture, to get more people buying organic, buying local, buying good food. It is for more people to see food as a sort of lynchpin of a huge number of problems that we face—social, economic and environmental.

Another farmer explained that beyond producing food, “we are meeting tons of people in the community and those people are meeting each other and so we feel like it’s a really community-building model.” A number of farmers described internships as a way to build ecological literacy and to create a new generation of activists and advocates that could learn to articulate resistance to the dominant food system and play an active role in building alternatives. One farmer described their interns as “disaffected, urban youth that are pissed off with the system because it’s got nothing for them and they see that this is something different.”

Most interns we spoke with described their farm training experiences as complementary to their ideals of a sustainable food system:

It’s a kind of protest against the industrialization of our society.... I think that farming and self-sustainability is extremely important and valuable not only as a way of keeping oneself and one’s community sustained with food from this very local ground, it’s also a way of protecting the earth, working with the earth and being stewards of the earth.

Furthermore, many interns reflected on their different motivations for working without a wage on an ecological farming operation. These sentiments are reflected in the following comments:

One of the reasons why working all those hours [without a wage] felt fine to me was because I felt like my personal and my political were aligned. And I still felt good at the end of the day, like I was doing something worthwhile that was working towards the kind of world that I want to live in and I want the next generation to live in.

A lot of other farms with experienced growers are bringing [interns] in and training them and they’re good farmers. The more quality farmers there are the more capacity there is to promote other kinds of social change and build a movement.

These remarks are concurrent with the literature describing the way that short-term volunteer tourism on farms create openness to living in interconnectedness: building bonds with other people and the working landscape, as well as generating a critical awareness that inspires activism and social movement building (Miller and Mair 2015b).

Beyond direct agriculture work, many farmers and interns described using their ecological experiences to connect to initiatives addressing broader issues in sustainable food systems policy and practice. For example,

respondents repeatedly referred to their involvement in social movement network organizations, such as: the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (a regional farmer's coalition); Sustain Ontario: The Alliance for Healthy Food and Farming (a regional food systems network organization); the National Farmers Union (a family farmers' organization and member of the international peasant movement; La Via Campesina) and Food Secure Canada (a pan-Canadian food movement alliance).

Engaging in a non-monetary exchange of education for labor

The majority of respondents described internships as part of a fair and mutual exchange of education for labor, outside of traditional market relations. One farmer told us, "The farm internship has the potential to be spiritually transformative... that in itself should be cherished and valued apart from the financial transaction." Likewise, an intern suggested, "There's a lot of non-monetary value that people are getting from [an internship], whether it's a sense of wellbeing or a healthy lifestyle." Another intern explained,

We are so trapped in this capitalism mentality of money.... [Internships are] like a new system where you're not just working in exchange for money, but in exchange of services and goods directly... and sometimes I ask myself, 'am I giving the same amount of what I'm receiving back and not just in financial ways but in other ways?' I feel like it's a fair exchange.... I'm fed really well here and I have a place to sleep, it's really comfortable.

Common ways that interns described their compensation included the provisioning of room and board, farm produce, small monetary stipends, ongoing education and training, along with a range of other supports from farm hosts. For some farms, compensation was explicitly communicated and negotiated through contracts that outlined expectations of farmers and interns in advance. Some farmers also developed formal systems for communication and regular check-ins throughout the season. A way that one farmer addressed economic transparency was through a model of revenue sharing where interns were given a share of the land, produce and financial gains at the end of the season. Another farmer explained their practice of paying a wage and then deducting costs for room and board, educational services, stipends, and other expenses—all described in an initial contract.

In most cases, the levels of compensation were quite significant. A number of farmers who calculated the dollar value of these provisions in relation to the cost of paid labor concluded that they were compensating interns well above what a minimum wage job would provide. Reflecting on the levels of remuneration, one intern explained that when she had worked for minimum

wage on a farm, she was in deficit after paying for her own rent, food, transportation and other living expenses. “And that did not feel the same,” she noted. “It didn’t give me the same satisfaction because it was not as much of a lifestyle. It felt more like a job.”

Despite the physically demanding work, well-designed internships appeared to engage participants in qualitatively different activities than paid workers. For example, one farmer explained,

I love the opportunity to teach sustainable growing practices [and] clean food ideas to the workers, and thus provide an opportunity for them to change what they do and how they will live. A paid position would be less likely to be a vehicle for change.

Many interns also expressed that their experience did not just “feel like work”. For example, one intern noted,

I think there’s more of an exchange and it’s not exactly monetary and it’s not exactly time and it’s not really linear. It’s not like you get this and I get that. But it’s a relationship... versus the employee role is more like, ‘I’m paying you to do my labor for me quickly and efficiently and at the end of the day, you go home and it’s my farm and you’re just an employee’.

These comments highlight a key opportunity offered by internships, that is, they represent an attempt to carve out alternative socio-ecological relationships within the interstices of a corporate industrial food system. This is being achieved through a series of non- or quasi-monetary relationships focused on the transfer of knowledge and the establishment of political competencies that are shifting the terrain of agrarian production.

The limitations of ecological internships

Despite the perceived optimism about internships, our research identified a series of limitations that pull farmers, interns and the sector in a decidedly different direction from what is outlined above. I describe these limitations through some of the respondent’s comments about farmers’ dependency on non-wage labor, unjust labor practices and the exclusivity of the internship model.

Dependency on non-wage labor

Ecological farms might offer extensive social and ecological benefits, however, a number of farm operators were quick to point out that farming is first and foremost a business: “It has some different challenges and different rewards, but it still is a numbers game. Your bottom line is you have to pay your mortgage, you have to pay your bills.” The vast majority of farm owners in our sample expressed that they struggled to remain economically

viable due to the low price of food and the high capital costs of land and infrastructure. From the survey of farmers using interns reported by Ekers et al. (2016), the gross revenue of almost 50% of the farms was less than CDN \$50,000. However, even the farms that had a gross income of between CDN \$100,000 and CDN\$150,000 were running on very thin profit margins. This economic reality is synonymous with most farms across Canada (Qualman 2011).

Many farm operators made a direct link between low profitability and their decisions about labor:

Farming is not a highly paid profession and often times we are dumping money into the farm account from off-farm employment just to keep running. By the time all expenses are paid, there is little to no money left to pay employees.

The research findings suggested the pressure for ecological farms to use non-wage workers is significant. For example, a farmer who reported a higher-than-average annual gross income commented, “The farm would be bankrupt in no time at all if we were to pay everyone at least minimum wage.” These kinds of sentiments were reflected in a range of other farmers’ comments:

As the farmer I do not make minimum wage for my work and I could not possibly provide enough veggies to pay all the workers a full wage.
[Without interns] I might not be able to keep enough income for myself in the long term to feel like I was interested in continuing to farm.

Some farmers were quite explicit about the perceived benefits of using interns as non-waged workers, suggesting it was a way to avoid paying “insurance and workers’ compensation”, providing an ability “to produce goods and make a profit”, and that interns constituted “free labor that [the farm] otherwise could not afford”.

Most of the interns were well aware of this reality and reflected this in their description of the farm’s finances. One intern commented, “This is a very successful farm... and yet they still are dependent on [intern] labor. Without four [interns], they couldn’t run and I don’t think that they could pay four people ten dollars an hour.” In addition, one farmer expressed an explicit critique about the practice of using a non-wage labor force:

If you’re relying on interns as labor and you’re just getting interns because you need somebody to work on your farm, and you don’t have enough money to pay them or you don’t want to pay them because you don’t have to if they’re interns, that is obviously unacceptable for so many reasons.

Another farmer identified these realities as limitations to building a broader agroecology movement stating, “It will be very challenging to build the [ecological] farm sector in Canada if farms can’t afford to pay reasonable wages.”

The dependence on non-wage workers signals the way that many of these farms are reproducing themselves—despite being marginally profitable, if at all—through a reliance on non-commodified or partially commodified labor. Thus, the establishment of internship programs is not solely defined by the desire to train new farmers and contribute to sustainable food systems but is also about meeting on-farm labor demands using non-waged workers. While these conflicting perspectives are present on the farms in our sample population, a tension is also at work throughout the broader sector in respect to the economic and non-economic dimensions of farm internships, which cannot be easily teased apart from one another.

Unjust labor practices

Following from the dependency on interns as non-waged workers, many respondents raised concerns around unjust labor practices they experienced. Among the farms visited, some interns expressed frustration that they often performed the same tasks as paid counterparts. One intern commented,

It sucks being thirty-one and having no savings, and I'm a professional in this. I have 9 years of experience, which in any other field you should be in a management position at least making a salary that you feel comfortable with.

A farmer echoed these frustrations asking:

Is a farming internship about getting a job? If it is, then you should be paid as an entry-level job... If you're in an office or some other environment and you're there because you're hoping to get a job and you're not getting paid, that to me is just completely unethical. But somehow, with farming, different rules apply.

While most interns described positive experiences, these sentiments were not ubiquitous. Some expressed significant problems on the farms from health and safety concerns, unsatisfactory living conditions and lack of a substantial educational component as part of the internship. A number of interns explained that they worked extremely long hours and received few days off:

It was pretty stressful on the body and we had to wake up early often in the summer, and it sometimes felt like it would be nice to get a break, but of course we can't because we have to work. We're on a schedule.

Furthermore, some interns explained that they were asked to complete tasks for which they were not properly trained and felt unsafe doing. While some interns had the ability to discuss these concerns with their farm host, others expressed discomfort speaking directly to their “boss”. One respondent explained how she reacted when working conditions became unacceptable:

I ended up leaving after two and a half months. That was my most exploitative experience. On the website, it sounded great. He had a full internship package. The

description was great and it sounded really structured and he paid a stipend and room and board were included.... Getting there, however, I quickly learned that I was just there for my labor. He made absolutely no effort to teach me anything except as it related to the job that I was meant to do for him.

The gap between expectations of hands-on learning and a reality that internships are often structured as a form of non-waged work reflects the broader precariousness of internships and the deregulation of agricultural labor markets in which there is very little oversight. While Ontario has employment legislation that effectively bans unpaid internships it is very rare for laws and regulations to be upheld. This is further complicated by the vast array of exceptions to employment standards in the agricultural sector.⁴ The legal and regulatory vacuum regarding internships means that there are very few mechanisms in place for preventing cases like the one noted above. Moreover, while some farmers treat their interns as “employees” through making statutory contributions to Employment Insurance, the Canadian Pension Plan and the Employment Safety and Insurance Board, others operate on an entirely informal basis, leaving interns with little recourse in the workplace.

Exclusivity of internships

While internship experiences are ostensibly open to anyone who applies, our research found that there is an extremely narrow demographic of individuals who take on these positions. This limited participation is reflected in the self-reported demographics among study participants, highlighting the narrowness of alternative farming as a sector. Among the interns we met, the vast majority were white women, under 30 years old, and who held a university undergraduate or graduate degree. As one farmer commented, “White, middle-class, female, educated, suburban. That was almost all of our [interns].... Out of the twenty-one interns we have had, I think we had four men over the 3 years.”

Working on a farm in a rural environment without a wage can be extremely isolating and requires considerable social capital. Food movements have been critiqued for an agrarian imaginary that “romanticizes and universalizes an agrarian narrative specific to whites while masking the contributions and struggles of people of color in food production” (Alkon and McCullen 2010, 945). Rural environments are also described as having strong cultural associations with settler-colonialism, heteronormativity, and whiteness (Panelli et al. 2009). These perceptions came through clearly in some of our interviews. As one farmer told us,

⁴For a description of the rights of agricultural employees covered under the Ontario Employment Standards Act along with the exemptions, see www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/pubs/factsheets/fs_agri.php.

For a white kid who's maybe not saddled with what it means to be an immigrant, there's no stigma to taking that [farming internship]. They're going out and they're just doing a job and they're sowing their oats, they're pulling a Jack London and going out to see the world.

Furthermore, a woman involved in an urban farm internship explained why she chose not to work in a rural environment: “[White people] are entitled to being there. Like, why do I want to go to northern Ontario? I’m going to be the only black person. That’s uncomfortable, right?” Acknowledging this problem, a white farmer commented:

I’m not saying the farmers are racist and not selecting people of color to be interns, and I’m not saying interns are racist because they don’t want to go and work on a white farm. It’s racism in its latent form, where people are just not comfortable going there. White farmers aren’t advertising their interns to some places where people of color are likely to see them. That’s a kind of systemic racism as opposed to that personal kind of hateful racism.

These comments highlight the barriers to entry associated with becoming an intern and the limited access to the subsequent education, training and other privileges that are part of the experience. Furthermore, these barriers to participation may hinder opportunities for building an inclusive and transformative agroecological sector. Much like non-agricultural internships, structural inequalities limit what few jobs are available and go to those who can afford to work for free to acquire skill training, relationships and familiarity with a particular career (Perlin 2012). Many farm operators acknowledged this fact, as one respondent recognized, “Not paying interns limits the demographic of people who are able to work on organic farms and learn the trade.” The concern here is that internships might be contributing to promoting a certain kind of farmer who meets specific class and racialized norms, further limiting the diversity of sustainable food systems more broadly.

Discussion

Findings from this research demonstrate a range of different perspectives and experiences surrounding internships, and raise important questions about their continued practice and contributions to agroecology and sustainable food systems movements. Advocates have argued that agroecology has the potential to subvert the corporate industrial food system by emphasizing equity, self-sufficiency and ecological stewardship (Fernandez et al. 2013; Gliessman 2013). Within this context, internships can be viewed as mutually beneficial, hands-on experiences that are part of meeting sustainable food systems’ goals. Through an informal exchange of labor for education and experience, there are a series of benefits expressed by host farmers and

interns ranging from enhanced ecological and social knowledge to increased connections with communities of food practice. From this perspective, these non-monetary interactions resonate with descriptions of community economies that acknowledge the diverse activities excluded in capitalist economic calculations (Gibson-Graham 2006). These kinds of politics point to ecological food production as a key element for establishing new kinds of human and ecological relationships.

However, internships also raise serious ethical and operational questions for the viability of ecological farm businesses and for longer-term food systems change. The vast majority of farmers in the sample population confessed that their operations were dependent on using interns as non-wage labor because they could not afford to hire full-time workers or pay a minimum wage. Some interns also expressed that they had been subjected to unjust labor practices during their time on the farm. Furthermore, the exclusivity of the internship experience may be part of reproducing class and racial inequality in the sector. To work without wages can certainly be exploitative; however, when it comes to internships, this is always in tension with the considerable privilege inherent in the ability to forgo formal employment (Perlin 2012). To be able to take on a four-to-eight month, non-wage position in a rural community requires a considerable amount of social and economic privilege, but also raises questions over workplace justice as these workers often perform the same tasks as their paid counterparts.

Despite critical comments of capitalist social and ecological relations, the majority of farms in this study using interns as non-waged workers are still engaged in forms of commodity exchange subject to market logics to maintain economic viability. Biewener (2016) noted that while unpaid food work may be “an alternative to capitalist labor relations... in itself, uncommodified work or unpaid work is not inherently less exploitative or more just than capitalist wage-labor” (13). In the case of internships, there is ostensibly a reciprocal exchange taking place, however, there is no standard internship model and experiences vary widely between farms and even among individual interns on the same farm. Without any kind of regulation or oversight, the particular elements of an internship are left up to the individual farmer, who may, or may not have any experience as an educator or employer. Thus, there is no way to ensure that the exchange is mutually beneficial and that interns receive value from the experience equal to or greater than the labor they contribute. As this research demonstrates, some farmers have attempted to design internship models that take their role as a host (and educator) seriously while others have taken advantage of interns as non-waged laborers to maintain their struggling farm business. While ecological farms in Canada are an integral part of sustainable food systems, they are predominantly structured as for-profit businesses as opposed to cooperatives or non-profit

organizations mandated to redistribute profits equitably (monetary or otherwise).

This points to another major tension—the uncritical assertion that interns are gaining political competencies as part of a broader social movement. While many of the farmers and interns in this study named sustainable food systems goals as an integral part of their work, it cannot be taken for granted that an ecological operation is automatically synonymous with goals of social, ecological and economic justice (Getz, Brown, and Shreck 2008). Too often, respondents' comments idealized farms as part of alternative socio-ecological relationships that were not fully demonstrated or explained. As mentioned above, all of the farms that were part of this study were engaged in market relationships, albeit alternative ones. Thus, beyond the rhetoric, it is unclear that internships in Ontario are part of building alternative practices and values in resistance to the corporate industrial food system or if they are simply a response to the political economy of a system that creates a precarious labor system.

Ecological farms are playing a central role in the nascent agroecology movement and thus, engaging the tensions posed by internships is imperative for meeting sustainable food systems' goals that include social justice. The different perspectives and experiences emerging from this research demonstrate that there is no simple way to negotiate the desire for experiential, non-institutionalized agroecological training and the reliance on non-waged farm labor with the subsequent exclusivity and precarious nature of internship models. Considering the research findings, I conclude by pointing to four general areas where engaging the tensions could improve internship models while developing new education and training practices with a vision toward food system transformation.

First, it must be acknowledged that internships are more than simply work and that wages should not be the only factor considered in respect to the value of being an intern. Reflecting on the findings from this research, we must consider the range of potential benefits to interns, such as worker autonomy and satisfaction (e.g., creativity and control in these spaces) as well as the quality of the particular internship experience. The motivations of many farmers and interns were rooted in personal and social values of ecological farming as a career as well as activism and advocacy about social justice and ecological sustainability. How each individual perceives the quality of his or her experience matters, although internships cannot be separated from the structural inequalities that privilege certain groups over others as farmers-in-training.

Improving the consistency and quality of an internship's educational component while limiting the exploitive potential is also essential. Education programs varied widely among the farms in the study. Learning by simply absorbing the farm environment and asking the right questions are

not enough. Many farmers and interns spoke most highly of experiences that provided a diverse range of on-farm experiences and reserved specific times to focus on education and farm management skills, as opposed to simply shadowing a farmer or only doing rudimentary tasks (e.g., weeding and watering). A positive experience was also enhanced through engaging with non-profit organizations involved in farmer training that supported the development of a curriculum. Some of these organizations also offered supports for farmers and interns related to relationship building and communication, including providing draft contract templates, educational resources, joint educational opportunities with other farms and groups of interns, as well as train-the-trainer support programs for farmers. Having secondary support systems might also enable interns a place to voice concerns or challenges if and when they arise. Despite the valuable support systems established, these organizations were often volunteer-run and had little capacity. As a result, they tended to work primarily with active and progressive farmers leaving the “bad” internships behind. Further research could identify and analyze successful internship models that could be shared, replicated and/or scaled-up.

Second, farmers and interns often pointed to low profit margins as a justification for not paying interns a wage. While ecological farms face significant structural challenges to profitability and farmers are particularly vulnerable, the research presented in this paper demonstrates that many were also adamant that all workers (interns or otherwise) should be compensated fairly for their labor. Many of the informants suggested that successful internships should be premised on making elements of the exchange explicit, transparent and democratic from the outset. Examples from the study farms discussed above included developing transparent contracts outlining expectations of farmers and interns along with processes for regular check-ins and feedback. This openness challenges traditional employer-employee relationships by enabling interns to participate in decision-making processes and have control over the terms of their contract. The expressed intention of these practices was to disclose and negotiate financial and non-financial commitments with interns, but such an approach begs the question of why interns are not considered employees in the first place, as they are legally required in other sectors.

At the most basic level, interns (as non-waged workers) should be compensated fairly for their work. Future research could help to more accurately calculate the qualitative and quantitative value of the exchange between farmers and interns and identify models of transparency and revenue sharing that are mutually beneficial.

Third, the research pointed to the possibility of public sector regulation and supports for farm internships and related models of informal new farmer training. Currently, there are extensive subsidies available to conventional farming

operations, some of which may be transferable to agroecological farms. The Canadian Government offers multiple seasonal and temporary employment subsidies that farmers could potentially access. For example, the Green Jobs Initiative, Canada Summer Jobs and Career Focus wage subsidies could be tailored to support farming internships. Another suggestion from the research was to collectively address policy opportunities and legal innovations that support new farmer training. For example, in some US states, specific regulations have been developed to support small-to-medium scale agroecological farms in supporting trainees. Similar to other government certified apprenticeship programs in Canada, this could involve setting up formal agroecological training programs that offer accreditation upon completion. Of note, the majority of certified apprenticeships are paid, and this would also be the goal for agroecological farms. Relying on new farmer training through the current internship model may limit who chooses farming as a valid career path, while better support systems could help to promote broader access to these experiences for those who might otherwise be unable to work without a wage. This would also help to improve the consistency and quality of education while limiting the exploitive potential. Further research could explore the historical and existing models of public supports for agroecological education and training as well as advocate for new opportunities.

Finally, establishing creative alternatives beyond private land ownership has the potential of strengthening the political implications of agroecology more broadly. For example, a number of farmers expressed aspirations to shift the farm's ownership structure toward a cooperative model or land trust, institute revenue sharing with interns or share parts of their land with aspiring new farmers. Challenging the structural forces that give rise to the need for non-wage agricultural labor and limit farmers from hiring full-time workers ultimately requires collective solutions as part of building the power of social movements. This might include connecting with other farmers and training programs, but also joining in solidarity with social movements that support environmental protection, farm and food workers and participatory policy development. This also demands connecting with food sovereignty and agroecology movements on a regional, national and global scale. Further research could examine the existing networks between farms and food movements in North America and beyond, as well as the opportunities and limitations for aligning sustainable food systems goals across sectors and scales.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented an overview of the different perceptions and experiences surrounding the phenomenon of ecological farm internships. As illustrated, the impetus to recruit interns is based on a range of economic needs, the desire to train a new generation of farmers and an interest in ecological and social justice for food systems. It would be tempting to suggest that internships are part of a progressive social movement by moving beyond monetary

exchange, or to simply discount this work as a reflection of the growing precarious and unjust labor conditions associated with neoliberalism. However, it is my contention that internships straddle the line between sustainable food systems actors and non-waged employees, just as ecological farmers are simultaneously small business owners and social movement activists. By engaging these tensions, future research and practice must consider social justice as a core element of agroecology and sustainable food systems movements in Canada.

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