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**She Owns It: A Study of White Women Landowners**

**A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts**

**in the Department of Sociology**

**The University of Mississippi**

**by**

**HANNAH JUNE BULLOCK**

**December 2022**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Southeast Missouri is home to some of the nation's most valuable farmland per acre on average. Just twenty-four percent of this agricultural land is in possession of female landowners. This study investigates the experiences of these female producers using Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping in order to understand their decision making process and the barriers that they are confronted with in their social field, as well as their relationship to capital, as women in agriculture. The findings of this study can serve as a needs assessment for this community and can be used to develop solutions that can help this community achieve a more equitable experience as women in agriculture.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Southeast Missouri is the most “intensively cropped area” of the state, producing a wide range of crops that are able to flourish due to the specific nature of the area’s land and environment (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). The counties that make up Missouri’s Southeastern region, also known as the Bootheel, hold some of the state’s most valuable agricultural land. The eight counties -- Butler, Cape Girardeau, Dunklin, Mississippi, New Madrid, Scott, Pemiscot and Stoddard -- have an average value of \$5,154 per acre, while the state-wide average is \$3,385 per acre (Plain and White, 2021). Bootheel land is also considerably more valuable than agricultural land nationally, which averages \$3,080 per acre (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2021). This value is in large part due to the Bootheel’s close proximity to the Mississippi River, creating incredibly fertile soil.

In the Bootheel area, there are 6,100 operators of agricultural land -- meaning individuals who are responsible for and involved in the day to day decision making as it pertains to the upkeep and maintenance of agricultural land. Of those 6,100 operators, only 24% are female (1,474) (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.). In such a predominantly male field, female operators and decision-makers experience a range of challenges, which have been relatively under-explored in this region (Sachs et al., 2016). While female landowners differ from operators in that they are not listed as day to day decision makers by the United States Department of Agriculture, they are still directly influenced by the outcomes of the land that they own, and the success or failure of their land to produce sellable crops determines the income and

livelihood of these women and their families. Additionally, land ownership allows these female landowners access to a source of wealth (the land itself) and power that can be passed down through generations. Therefore, the interactions and decisions these women are having with their land carry much more weight than the interactions of women who do not own land but act as operators because of the potential generational effects that the landowners could be creating. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of these female decision-makers, particularly those who own the land they farm, in order to understand these challenges and the barriers they are confronted with as female producers.

While the experiences and stories of these women will certainly offer a valuable glimpse into the lives of women in agriculture, their experiences should be considered in the context of the social structures and norms that exist within agriculture. By applying Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus, the context in which these women are navigating the agricultural world becomes more clear, providing a more nuanced and complete understanding of their experiences (Raedeke et al. 2003: 65).

Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus allow for a more complete understanding of a person's social reality and the influence of the social structures and individuals that they exist alongside. The field represents the societal structures and networks that an individual interacts with and participates in. Within each field, there are "rules", or norms, that individuals either reproduce or attempt to transform. Reproduction of norms among individuals solidifies those norms and serves to conserve the state of the field (Bourdieu, 1990).

Habitus on the other hand is less about the social structures, but is instead more about the way individuals internalize the ongoing of the social world that they are a part of. A person's habitus is shaped by their understanding of how to navigate their social field and has an effect on

a person's "attitudes, values, perceptions, and dispositions in ways in which we are seldom aware" (Radeke et al., 2003: 69, Bourdieu, 1986).

In this study, the application of Bourdieu's concepts give way to a more full understanding of the decisions that these women landowners are making. The various dimensions and nuances of the decisions that are being made become more clear as we start to more deeply understand the social field that these women are navigating and its influence, in addition to the way that they have internalized the social world around them. To ignore such entities and their influence would not allow for an adequate conception of these women, their lived experiences, and the barriers that they face.

In the United States, the farming occupation is largely dominated by men and the Bootheel is no exception. Men's dominance in this field is not a random phenomenon, but is instead a byproduct of centuries of patriarchal influence. Patriarchal ideology is deeply ingrained into US laws, especially in laws pertaining to land ownership. In the United States, white women were not able to own or have control over land, this was enforced both with laws and with social customs, though it was legally allowed for women to inherit land if a spouse or parent died and left it to them. Married women were prohibited from owning land under common law (Sachs, 1996:50).

In the eighteenth century, it became legally allowed for married women to own land in their own names. But, legal permittance of this small amount of land ownership resulted in little change in the world of agriculture. Men continued to own and control most of the land, and women were left with little to no collateral to use as a means of accruing their own capital, and ultimately meant that women were excluded from the ability to purchase land on their own (Sachs, 1996:50).



Very little changed for women in regards to land ownership over time in the United States. Since the World War II era, farm journalists, U.S. cooperative extension services, government and popular media as a whole have pushed Americans towards viewing farms as businesses that are meant to span generations. Emphasis was placed on encouraging male farmers to pass their land on to their sons as a way of keeping their farm in the “family name” (Sachs, 1996:136). Such practices clearly favor men and create not only a power imbalance, but also unequal access to capital, these practices were seldom questioned by those who were affected. In fact, these patriarchal values and the unbalanced power structure that had been created were simply viewed as tradition and custom in many rural communities (Sachs, 1996: 140). It is through this view of exclusion as tradition that the social field reinforces patriarchal ideology and it becomes seen as a norm within these communities. Additionally, it leads to the embodiment of these norms and ways of thinking and becomes a part of habitus for those who operate within the field.

As the world around them is shaped by men, women may struggle viewing themselves and their experiences separate from the influence of such patriarchal ideology. Some women may not even view their exclusion from land ownership and management over time as exclusion, but rather view it simply as tradition because to think of themselves outside of the male dominated and patriarchal structures that they exist in requires language and insight that they may not have been exposed to within their own social sphere (Sachs, 1996: 16).

Agricultural institutions are not excluded from the influence of patriarchal ideology. Public institutions that are intended to support agricultural work by providing education, research and assistance to farmers have done little to acknowledge that women do exist as landowners in the agricultural sphere and have done very little to develop programming or means of assistance

that would be beneficial to women farmers and help them overcome the specific barriers that they may face. (Sachs et al., 2016, 12). This oversight is a byproduct of the patriarchal tradition in the US of viewing agricultural work as reserved for men that has been internalized by those working for public institutions, creating a feedback loop that serves men who work in agriculture, while leaving women in agriculture behind. This “traditional” point of view has also created a lack of information on how to best serve women in agriculture, as there has been little done to assess the needs of the group.

The United States Department of Agriculture developed the Agriculture and Home Economics Extension Service in 1914 in order to provide educational services to farmers and homemakers. However, the program failed to acknowledge that women were capable of doing work outside of the home, dividing itself into two parts -- one centered on men and farming and another centered on women and home economics. That gendered division continues to exist in USDA programming to this day, with men receiving more benefits from programming that centers on income support, crop insurance, disaster mitigation and obtaining farm loans (Sachs et al., 2016). Practices such as these not only favor men in agriculture, but serve as institutional reinforcements of patriarchal ideology that make it more difficult for women to own and manage farmland in a similar way and similar scale to men (Sachs et al., 2016).

Women in agriculture across the board are plagued by the effects of such practices and exclusion. There is a clear gender gap in the agricultural world in ability to obtain access to the capital and services that are needed such as land, education, financial services and labor. The cost of such a gap is not only detrimental to women, but to society as whole, as the total amount of agricultural output in the world could be significantly increased if women were given proper access to tools and programming that would address their needs (Food and Agriculture

Organization of the United Nations 2011). Additionally, owning assets such as farmland can be greatly beneficial as a means to obtaining a sense of financial security and improving overall quality of life (Deere and Doss, 2005).

In a study of twenty-two women farmers in Pennsylvania, seventeen of them reported experiencing various forms of discrimination in the agricultural world based on their perceived gender (Trauger et al., 2009). The women faced a wide range of barriers and methods of exclusion, but most commonly they struggled to be taken seriously by their male peers, had difficulty obtaining financial support or the necessary farm equipment, and were rarely viewed as members of the local farming community. These women often cited feeling as though their exclusion was based upon their gender and their community's perception of them as being "different" -- in other words, not adhering to the norms of the social field (Trauger et al., 2009).

The five women in the study who did not report feeling discriminated against based on gender, made no mention whatsoever of their gender in their interviews for the study, or they silenced their gender. By silencing their gender, these women would attempt to downplay being viewed as a "woman farmer" and try to masculinize themselves. In doing so, they hoped that if they could present themselves as a more masculine, or simply less female, figure that they would be taken more seriously by their male counterparts (Trauger et al., 2009). In such a way, these women were trying to adopt the norms of the social field, despite the fact that they were inherently going against the standard expectations in their field.

The work of Dr. Carolyn Sachs and Dr. Amy Trauger highlights the importance of community building among women in agriculture, especially those who want to be involved in decision making and take a more active role. By creating community and a sense of shared identity, women who are actively engaged with agricultural work are offered some respite from

the power dynamics and expectations of their social field. Trauger's study of Pennsylvanian farmers is a particularly great example of such community building. In order to feel comfortable viewing themselves strictly as farmers, the women of the study often considered themselves "sustainable farmers" (Trauger, 2004). By doing so, these women were able to use the niche of sustainability to develop a sense of community and identity within agriculture that allowed for some degree of separation from the social expectations and patriarchal tradition that previously contributed to their feelings of exclusion, which Trauger ultimately views as an act of resistance to the norms of their social field (Trauger, 2004).

The institutional exclusion and neglect of women in agriculture has created a social field that is not easy for women landowners to navigate. These institutional barriers create difficulty for these women and the purpose of this study is to learn about the various forms that such barriers take on. Not only do women landowners have to confront barriers in their social field as individuals who would be perceived as "outsiders" in the male dominated field of agriculture, but there is a possibility that they have unknowingly embodied these "rules" of the field in their own habitus and that could serve as a barrier on its own. It is the ultimate goal of this study to assess what women landowners perceive to be barriers to decision making, their attitudes towards those barriers, and possible recommendations that would allow for female landowners to be more involved with decision making.

## **Chapter II: Methods & Analysis**

### *Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping*

Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping is a mixed methods approach that was originally developed for use in other scientific disciplines in order to understand an individual's decision making process in the context of their own community (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004). FCM is used to create a cognitive map that is constructed by the participant over the course of an interview, allowing participants to demonstrate their specific understanding of the influences actors and institutions within the system have on their decision-making process and experiences (Cafer et al. 2019, Ozesmi & Ozesmi 2004). Use of FCM in this way allows deeper understanding of the power dynamics and structures that are at play within a specific social field. For this study, it is crucial that the findings are based around the perceptions and experiences of the participants, independent of outside influence.

In FCM, participants guide the interview and construction of the cognitive map, this puts the control in their hands. This is important to ensuring that their voices, not researcher interpretations, are used to ascribe importance to each of the variables and explain in their own words the impact of each variable on them and their social environment (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004). FCM provides a mechanism for taking abstract concepts and relationships and quantifying them, which allows the researcher to aggregate up from individual interviews and to the community level, creating a community map (Cafer et al. 2019). For this study in particular,

where the participants are outliers of the norm, it is important to note that FCM is capable of accurately communicating the experiences of participants who may not fit the dominant perspectives of their social field (Cafer et al. 2019). In this way, FCM provides a mechanism for lifting up those voices that are often most marginalized.

FCM's extensive history of utilization in agricultural settings to understand decision-making and farmer perceptions make it appropriate for this study (Markinos et al., 2020, Shahrin, 2016). FCM is also incredibly useful in understanding the local/specific knowledge that individuals hold, especially knowledge pertaining to their livelihood (Satama and Iglesias, 2020). Because of this, FCM is a natural fit for this research, as it has been proven in the past to be capable of accurately reflecting the experiences, decision-making process and perceptions of individuals who work in agriculture.

While multiple approaches can be used to employ this method, FCM is traditionally employed using qualitative interviewing followed by mapping construction. For this study, a structured interview was conducted with each of the 15 participants. Each participant self-identified as a woman who owned farmland in Southeast Missouri. Cognitive map development followed the structured interview.

### *Study Sample*

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways – phone calls, snowball sampling and social media. Snowball sampling proved to be the most effective form of recruitment for the study, as the researcher's own local knowledge and relationships with community members proved useful in identifying and contacting potential participants. Often, as an interview with a participant was completed, they would suggest additional individuals who qualified for the study.

Being from this area granted the researcher a level of local knowledge and connections to individuals that made recruiting for the study more straightforward than it would have been if the researcher were from elsewhere. This close proximity to the area also presented its own challenges, as participants would occasionally express nervousness about information being shared, but assurance of confidentiality often mitigated those concerns. Building rapport and trust was not difficult in large part because of the shared experience of being from the area. Of eighteen individuals contacted for participation, only three declined to participate.

### *Priming Interviews*

Priming interviews (structured individual interviews) were used to allow participants time to process their experience as a female landowner and their own attitudes and perceptions. Asking priming questions is a useful technique among populations where the topic has not been readily discussed (Cafer et al., 2022). These interviews consisted of open ended questions about the participant's experience as a woman who owns farmland. These priming questions (located in table 1) were purposefully designed to encourage responses that highlight the participant's experiences, attitudes, perceptions and barriers that they face. Responses were then used to identify a set of variables that participants indicated as important contributors to their experiences or barriers in their field. Upon completion of the interview, participants were shown a list of these variables and asked to review it, adding or removing any variables they perceived to be missing or incorrect at their own discretion. Participants were then given the option to dictate to the researcher how to draw the map, or to draw their own map. During this process they illustrated connections/influences between variables and the strength of those connections. This was done by drawing arrows between variables they felt hold a connection, then labeling

that arrow with the strength and polarity of that connection using a scale of 1-10 and positive or negative signs (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004). Participants were given an example map unrelated to the current topic to serve as an illustrative example. Additionally, a short list of instructions were given to the participants:

1. Identify variables.
2. Draw arrows to showcase connections between variables, with arrows pointing in the direction of influence. Variables that had influence on another are classified as “drivers”, and variables that are affected by another are classified as “receivers”.
3. Label the strength of each connection you identify on a scale of 1-10, with one being weakest and ten the strongest.
4. Use a positive or negative sign to further label each connection, with positive indicating a good influence and negative indicating a bad influence.

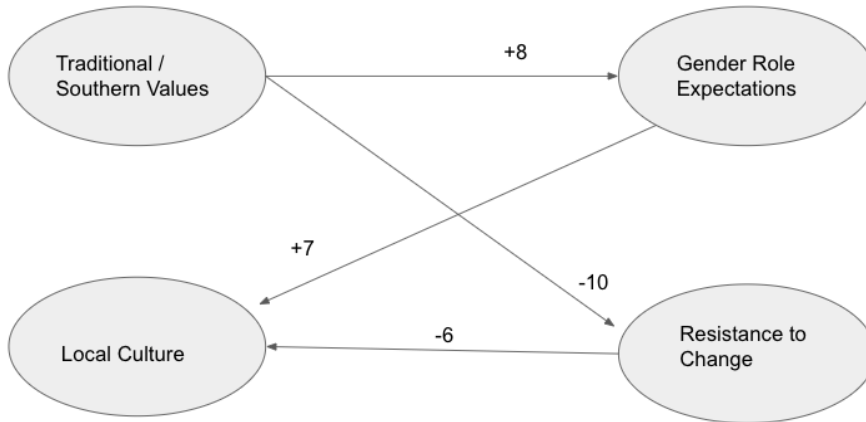
## Priming Questions (Table 1)

How did you come into owning your land?
<p>How did you learn what you needed to know in order to feel comfortable making decisions in regard to your land?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What resources did you tap into? (can be an organization, a person, literature, etc.)</li> <li>• Did you feel adequately prepared to step into land ownership?</li> <li>• What are things you didn't know about that you felt you should have?</li> <li>• How do you think you compared to male counterparts?</li> </ul>
<p>What kind of decisions are you making in regard to your land?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you seek outside opinions? If so, from who?</li> <li>• Who affects these decisions or can also play a part in your decision making process? (can be a partner, an institution, a business)</li> </ul>
<p>Do you feel connected to the agricultural community?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel as though you are accepted as a member of the agricultural community?</li> <li>• Are you treated equally to your male counterparts?</li> <li>• Have you experienced any difficulties navigating this community?</li> <li>• Have you noticed a change in your social life?</li> </ul>



In this study all participants chose to draw their own maps, and each interview ended once participants felt their map was complete. A simplified example of such a map is showcased below (Figure 1).

Example Individual FCM (Fig. 1)



### *Community Map and Condensing*

The data from each map was coded into an adjacency matrix (Fig 2). Variables that were identified were entered into both column and row cells, then the numerical value and polarity of the connection between variables was put into the matrix, using matrix addition as needed. The adjacency matrix then allowed for addition of the same variables across the maps and helped identify common factors within the maps. This also allowed for the aggregation of individual maps, using matrix algebra, into a community map that is representative of these women.

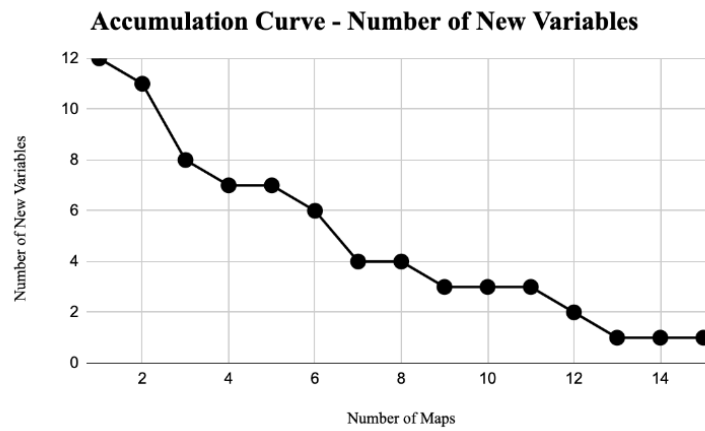
Example Individual Map Adjacency Matrix (Fig 2)

Example Individual Map Adjacency Matrix				
	Traditional/ Southern Values	Gender Role Expectations	Local Culture	Resistance to Change
Traditional/ Southern Values		+8		-10
Gender Role Expectations			+7	
Local Culture				
Resistance to Change			-6	

Using context from the interviews, as well as existing literature, related and closely connected variables in the larger community map were condensed into submaps within the larger map. Initially, there were 75 variables identified across interviews, these variables were divided into 8 thematic submaps (smaller groups of variables that were connected). For example, concerns about income, access to funding and a desire to feel financially secure were condensed into the singular variable: “financial barriers”. This condensing resulted in 30 variables across the submaps (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004).

The process of creating the community maps began once all the variables had been condensed and input into their final matrices. Google Slides was used to draw the variables and their associations with one another. Within FCM, a variable acts one of two ways – as either a “driver” or “receiver” in relation to other variables. Drivers are variables that are identified as having an influence on other variables, while receivers are those variables that have been identified by participants as being affected or influenced by the drivers. This highlights the causal relationship between the variables (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004). The arrows connecting the variables vary in pattern and color based on the strength of the relationship. Additionally, an accumulation curve was created to ensure that the study had reached saturation. This curve plots

the number of new variables gleaned with each interview (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004). For this sample, by the 12th interview only two new variables were introduced and for the 14th and 15th only one new variable was introduced, indicating saturation (Fig. #). This is typical of FCM, as saturation is typically reached between 15 and 25 interviews (Ozesmi and Ozesmi 2004)



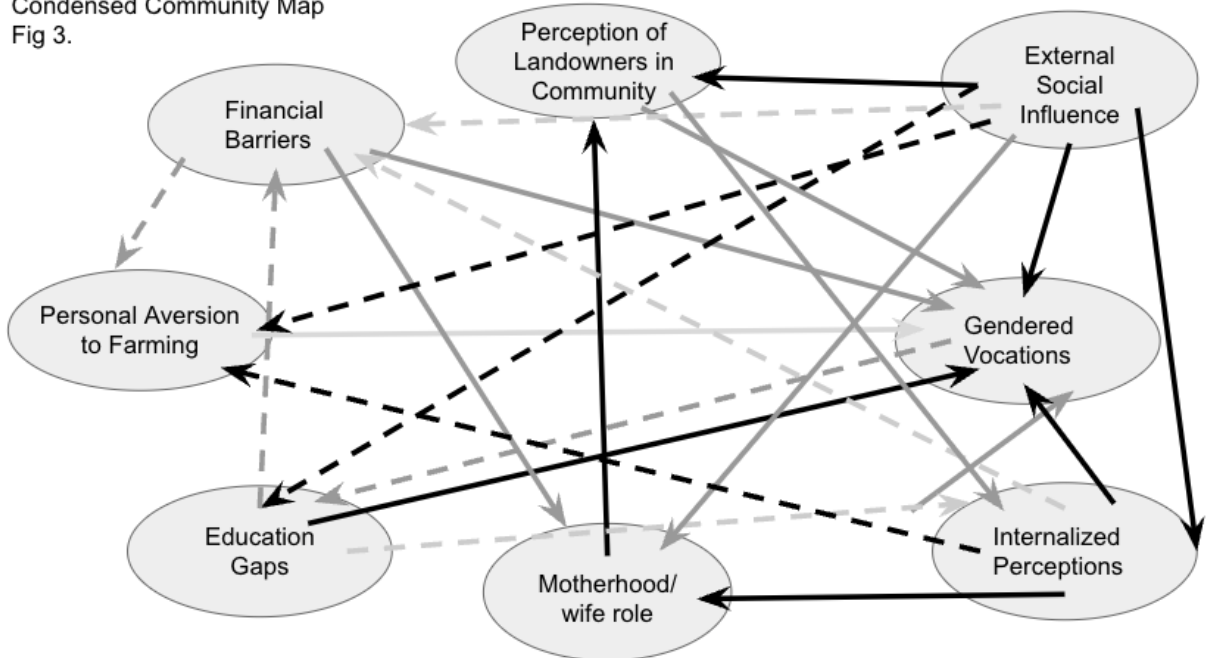
### Chapter III: Results

In the results, this paper will focus on the community map, derived from aggregating the individual maps. The complete community map from the FCM procedure is shown in Fig 3. The responses for positive and negative relationships were classified in three ways: strong, moderate and weak, depending on their value. Participants identified a number of barriers and relationships among those barriers that influenced their decision-making as a female landowner.

#### Community FCM Key

	Positive	Negative
Weak	→	- - - →
Moderate	→	- - - →
Strong	→	- - - →

Condensed Community Map  
Fig 3.



Theme	Sub Themes
<i>External Social Influence</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Local culture</li> <li>2. Traditions</li> <li>3. Agriculture being primarily a male-dominated field</li> <li>4. Sexism</li> <li>5. Resistance to change among community members</li> <li>6. Little support for women in agriculture within the community</li> </ol>
<i>Internalized Perceptions</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Assumed roles</li> <li>2. Difficulty breaking into the field</li> <li>3. Feeling that a woman in ag wouldn't be taken seriously</li> <li>4. Fear of being taken advantage of</li> <li>5. Feeling that it's not a woman's place to make decisions regarding land</li> </ol>
<i>Gendered Vocations:</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Labor requirements</li> <li>2. Inappropriate work for women</li> <li>3. Paperwork/bookkeeping</li> </ol>
<i>Financial Barriers</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Money/Access to funding</li> </ol>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Feeling of security</li> <li>3. Income</li> </ol>
<i>Education Gaps</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of agricultural education for women</li> <li>2. Feeling unknowledgeable</li> <li>3. Lending practices</li> </ol>
<i>Motherhood / Wife Role</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Motherhood and wife duties</li> <li>2. Importance of helping at home and with family</li> <li>3. Home and work balance</li> <li>4. Holding a job outside of farming</li> </ol>
<i>Perception of Landowners in Community</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Value of land</li> <li>2. Pride of being associated with land</li> <li>3. Family legacy</li> <li>4. Growing up on a farm</li> </ol>
<i>Personal Aversion to Farming</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Little desire to go into farming</li> <li>2. A personal decision</li> </ol>

*External Social Influence*

One of the biggest drivers that was identified by participants was external social influence. This external social influence had strong, positive driving relationships to participants' feelings of pride for being associated with owning agricultural land, carrying on family legacy

and placing high value on land ownership (regardless of how involved or not the participant was with the land). Being associated with land ownership often afforded participants not only financial capital, but also social capital within their communities. They were viewed as both individuals and members of family units that were responsible for carrying on a local tradition of farming, and with that came expectations and respect within the community that participants often took pride in. One participant was able to trace the family's ownership of the land back decades, telling stories of how the family came to own the land and how it was passed down through the generations, and excitedly speaking about how the land will be passed onto future generations of the family. The participant shared stories of how various family members interacted with the farm and its operations, and great pride was taken in the amount of individuals within the community that the family was able to employ to work on the land as farmhands. The participant took great pride in her family not only being known as landowners but employers within the community because of their land ownership. External social influence also had a strong, positive driving relationship with the gendered vocations theme, participants noting that the social norms in their communities often had a strong influence on the types of occupations that they were inclined to pursue, as they felt a sense of duty to maintain the norms of the community and their status as being associated with land ownership. This social influence also has a strong, positive driving impact on the landowner's internalized perceptions, as participants wanted to ensure they were adhering to the rules of the social field to maintain their place in the social hierarchy of the community and carrying on cultural tradition. This same desire also contributed to a strong, negative driving effect on participants' personal interest in farming and gaps in their education as it relates to owning land and farming.

### *Internalized Perceptions*

Internalized perceptions of female landowners regarding their position had a strong, positive driving relationship with gendered vocations and the motherhood/wife role, indicating that their perception of their social position in their communities influenced the types of work they were taking on and their prioritization of fulfilling the expectations of them as a wife and mother. Participants internalized the community perceptions and attitudes, contributing to their own habitus, creating a personal inclination towards performing in ways that would adhere to and enforce the norms of the social field they were in. One participant described it as “not a woman’s place” to be involved with decision making with the land, saying it would be hard for her to even imagine a woman occupying such a role. When asked why she felt this way, she cited her own values and belief system, saying it would go against the way she was raised and what she believed in for a woman to take control of decision making in this way. To her, it was the husband or father’s role to lead the family (and the farm) and the wife or mother’s duty to offer support through taking care of the home and children. Additionally, internalized perceptions had a strong, negative driving relationship with their personal interest in farming and a weak negative relationship with financial barriers, as they often feared that they could be taken advantage of by others working in agriculture or loan distribution, due to a lack of knowledge of agricultural practices.

### *Gendered Vocations*

Gendered vocations were identified by participants as having a low, negative driving effect on education gaps. Participants noted in their interviews that they felt as though the expectation for them to pursue certain occupations due to what was deemed “appropriate” work



for women that didn't require strenuous physical labor contributed to their gaps in education regarding best farming and land management practices. While they may be comfortable taking on book keeping or completing paperwork for their land, they often either weren't offered or did not pursue education that related to agriculture or land management. Often, the participants expressed an internalization and agreement with the view that agriculture may not be a suitable occupation for women, contributing to the "low" effect status of the variables. Important to note that while the gendered vocations theme was only identified by participants as being a driver for education gaps, the gendered vocations theme was predominantly a receiver. External social influence, internalized perceptions, perception of landowners in the community, financial barriers, lack of interest in farming, and education gaps were all noted as having driving influences on the participant's perceptions of gendered vocations.

### *Financial Barriers*

Financial barriers were identified by participants as having moderate, positive driving relationships with gendered vocations and motherhood/wife roles. Participants indicated that the financial uncertainty – and at times, financial hardship – that comes with taking on farming as an occupation had an influence on their desire to choose a profession that was deemed more reliable and acceptable for women within their community. This often meant taking on occupations such as nursing, teaching, or administrative assistant positions, where participants are able to be paid a salary and have a consistent income for their families in case their husband's income through the farm for the year did not do as well as they hoped. As this uncertain financial stability pushed the participants into particular occupations, it also added a new dynamic to their perceived role as a wife and mother. Taking on these "more stable" occupations was viewed not only as a means of

financial stability, but also contributed to a pressure to complete a duty that is required of them as a mother and wife to ensure that their family would be supported financially even if the crops did not do well this year.

Additionally, financial barriers had a moderate, positive driving impact on the participants having no personal interest in farming. Participants often noted that the cost itself of getting into farming, the instability that comes with farming and their sense of obligation to have a job outside of farming led them to have very little to no interest in farming.

### *Education Gaps*

Participants identified gaps in education as having a strong, positive driving relationship with gendered vocations. In interviews, it was often discussed that participants were drawn to more gendered vocations because they had little to no formal education about agriculture when they were younger. Instead, they were pushed into classes such as home economics, health, and art when they were in high school, while their male classmates were encouraged to take classes that focused more on agriculture and shop work and to join organizations like Future Farmers of America, where they were gaining knowledge and skills that would serve them well if they chose to take on farming as an occupation. This gap in education drove participants to pursue occupations that they felt they were being prepared to take on in school, such as teaching, nursing, administrative assistant roles or homemaking.

Education gaps were also identified as having a moderate, negative driving relationship with financial barriers, as participants noted that another reason they felt ill equipped to take on farming as an occupation was due to lack of knowledge on how to financially run a farm. Participants weren't taught (formally or informally) about how to obtain the loans necessary to

finance a farm, and had little understanding of what would be financially required to start a farming operation. Additionally, education gaps had a negative, weak driving impact on the internalized perceptions of the participants, with participants often noting that while they that felt they did not receive an education that would push them towards farming, it in a way simply reinforced their own internal perceptions that farming was not an occupation that was suitable for them to pursue.

### *Motherhood / Wife Role*

While several variables were identified as drivers of the participants' perceptions of the motherhood/wife role, the motherhood/wife role was only noted by participants as a driver itself of one other variable – a strong, positive driver of the perception of landowners in the community. Participants expressed in interviews that they felt their role as mothers and wives had certain expectations that contributed to the community's existing perception of landowners. Because the women interviewed felt they had to fulfill certain expectations as mothers and wives that required large chunks of their time – such as tending their homes, serving as primary caregivers for their children, holding a job outside of farming – it reinforced the existing community perceptions of what a landowner is, which is typically a male, carrying on a family legacy. Participants were tasked with performing certain duties as a wife or mother in order to support the landowner they were connected to. Not only was this support done to ensure the personal financial success of their family unit, but this support also ensured that the community perception of landowners was able to be applied to them, as being landowners afforded a certain level of prestige and influence within their communities.

### *Perception of Landowners in Community*

The perception of landowners in the community was identified as having a moderate, positive driving effect on internalized perceptions and gendered vocations. Often, participants and their families took pride in being viewed within their communities as landowners and being associated with land often created a sense of legacy that they were individually and collectively responsible for upholding. Participants in interviews often noted that feeling as though they were properly upholding their status as landowners influenced the career paths they chose to ensure they were adhering to the community's social norms. Additionally, participants would internalize those community perceptions of landowners, contributing to their own internal perceptions of themselves and the decisions they should or should not be involved in making in regards to their involvement with the land.

### *Personal Aversion to Farming*

The participants' personal aversion to farming had a weak, positive driving relationship with gendered vocations. Participants would at times describe their aversion to farming as a personal decision, or something they had little interest in, which led to their affinity to pursue vocations they found more acceptable. However, their own personal feelings towards thinking of themselves as working as a farmer were not brought up as a site of internal influence often in interviews.

## **Chapter IV: Discussion**

The FCM process reveals important influences on decision-making and the lived experience of female landowners in Southeast Missouri. Evaluating this data through Bourdieu's lenses of field and habitus provides the analytical tools for understanding the juxtaposition of these women's roles as land-owners but abstinence from decision-making regarding the use of that land as a means to occupy a more socially appropriate position. They legally occupy a non-traditional role within the community, but mitigate the apparent deviance of that role by oftentimes abdicating the authority of that role to their male counterparts.

The female landowners in this study typically did not seek an active role in the decisions being made about how to farm or manage the land that they own and did not seek out opportunities to be more involved in the decision making process, despite the fact that they are directly impacted by the decisions being made in regards to their land. In nearly direct opposition to the women studied by Dr. Sachs and Dr. Traeger who were constantly fighting against the norms in their respective agricultural fields and communities, the women in this study were often willing to abdicate their decision making power in regards to land in order to adhere to the norms of the social field they exist within, and often expressed feelings of content in doing so, despite the fact that land is a significant source of wealth and power. This willingness to not participate is often what afforded these women social and cultural capital in their communities as they were able to uphold and replicate the norms of their community in a way that benefited the way they and their families were viewed within their community. Because of their own habitus and knowledge of the community they live in, the women of this study were willing to exchange

their decision making power over the land that they own for social capital and security within the social field.

While the work of Dr. Sachs and Dr. Traeger sheds light on the Pennsylvanian women wanting to break into agriculture and doing so through community, this study has had a different outcome. While the women of this study are also outsiders within the agricultural community, they do not seek to be involved with the community for a variety of reasons – they themselves cannot imagine women doing such work and decision making, they do not want to challenge the existing norms of their social field, and they have no interest in making these decisions. Additionally, the women in this study often had a difficult time associating themselves with land ownership, often referring to themselves as an owner only by name or technicality. They often described their ownership as merely a title, whereas ownership when related to their male counterparts was often discussed as occupational and a site of identity. The women landowners in this study acknowledged that it would be very difficult for a woman to be involved with the decision making of land or to break into the agriculture field, however, that acknowledgment was often used as justification for women to stick to the social norms of the field and was not viewed as an issue.

If a woman in the area did want to become more involved with decision making in regards to her land, this study has shed light on a variety of barriers that she would face. Not only would she have to navigate a social field that would push for her to conform to the field's norms and expectations of motherhood and wiving, educational barriers, financial barriers, and the field push towards other occupations, she would also have to overcome any of her own internalized perceptions due to her existence within the field.

In order for women in Southeast Missouri to exercise decision making power in regards to their farm land, or for a woman to begin a career in agriculture in the area, they would have to go against the norms of the social field and likely, their own habitus. Women in Southeast Missouri are not encouraged to pursue such an avenue, but the work of Sachs and Traeger offers a glimpse into what could be possible for the women in this area – the possibility of branching out into decision making over land, building and fostering a community of support among women landowners, and ultimately having more autonomy over their land that is a site of both wealth and power.

## **Chapter V: Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of this study was to fill a gap in existing literature and offer insight into a community where little research exists. This study revealed interesting insights into the female landowning population in Southeast Missouri and their navigation of their social field. Often, it is assumed that groups who have traits that exist outside of the social norms of their field will act in opposition to the forces of the social field, resisting and challenging norms – in fact, the study conducted by Traeger of Pennsylvanian female farmers offers a glimpse into a group of women doing just that. However, the female landowners in this study present a different interaction with the social field by those who could very easily be considered outliers. Whether intentional or not, the women landowners of Southeast Missouri leveraged their own habitus and local knowledge of the norms of the area in order to safely position themselves to appear to adhere to the social norms, despite actively being in inherent opposition to norms by being a female landowner. While they hold economic capital by owning land, these women do not actively exercise the power and decision making opportunities that land ownership could offer them, and instead opt to preserve their social capital and positioning by replicating the norms of the field, which further reinforces those norms (Bourdieu, 1990).

This replication and reinforcement does not only affect the women in this study, but future generations of women landowners to come. Land ownership can be a site of economic and social power, however the women of this study do not express interest in engaging with land ownership in a way that would allow them to exercise that power. If the goal is to empower these women or future generations of women landowners to play a more active role in land ownership,



one possible pathway is to incorporate the findings of Traeger's work with Pennsylvanian female farmers and encourage community building among female landowners in Southeast Missouri. However, there is currently little interest among this population and the women in this study noted that they couldn't even imagine a woman playing a decision making role. Because of this, it may be more effective to focus on younger generations of women and use existing clubs and organizations in the area as sites of education on landownership and the opportunities that it offers. For example, the Future Farmers of America (FFA) national organization has chapters in nearly every high school in Southeast Missouri, if FFA sponsors incorporated activities that encouraged high school girls to learn about farming operations into their curriculum, it could simultaneously offer these young women a site of community and education that could empower them to take on a decision making role or pursue land ownership if they will not inherit land. It is the opinion of the researcher that the key to encouraging active decision making among the women studied and future generations is to build community that will give them the education and social climate that would empower them to become more involved in decision making, which would allow them to be more actively engaged with their own capital and power.

## **Chapter VI: Limitations**

It is important to note that of the fifteen women interviewed for this study, all were cis gendered, heterosexual, white women. However, this is reflective of the overall racial composition of women landowners in Southeast Missouri and exploration of race, sexuality and gender identity are outside of the scope of this analysis (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d.).

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## EDUCATION

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| <b>MA</b> | University of Mississippi, Sociology<br>Thesis: She Owns It: A Study of White Female Landowners<br>Advisor: Dr. Anne Cafer | Dec 2022 |
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| <b>Robert Khayat Award</b> | 2019 |
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## PRESENTATIONS AND INVITED LECTURES

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- Paper Presentation**, "She Owns It: A Study of White Female Landowners, RSA, Feb 2021

## PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

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- Rural Sociological Society, 2020-Present