



# FARMING IMAGINED

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VISUAL SOCIOLOGY BY KATIE KNAPP

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## INTRODUCTION

Sociology is about making what is invisible in the social world visible. Visual sociologists research through innovative, visual methods. In my case, that is photography because I believe images can expose what is within the “ordinary and the taken for granted” and can be “a point of access to the social world and an archive of it” (Knowles and Sweetman 2004: 7).

My research is about public understanding and imagination of farming. Many voices (e.g. media, NGOs, government, industry) present current farming practices in various ways. And much research has been conducted around the particular words used.

During the last decade, public interest in food production has increased alongside the publicity of it. During this time, farmers and others within production agriculture have developed many consumer outreach and education programs to add their voice to the mix (Holloway 2004: 328). Audits of these programs show “something’s just not working” (USFRA 2013: 6).

I have deep connections with this topic because my family farms in Illinois, and my professional background is in agricultural communications. I find issue in the fact that so many people have been working for so many years to bridge the communication gap between farmers and consumers, and it has not worked. So I decided to approach the subject in a new manner, a way that accounts for the imprecise and changing meanings of words used to describe food production (Cook 2004: 29).

The following is a summary of the findings from my visual sociology research on how people imagine farming—what they picture in their minds as ideal practices and how that compares to what they visualise is actually happening.

## METHODOLOGY

To understand what people imagine farming is from all the different voices describing it, I developed a tiered process. First, I compiled 112 photographs of farming practices in one form or another from several Western, industrial regions. I started with my own archive and added in photographs from Google and Flickr non-commercial reuse databases.

Next, I conducted photo-elicitation interviews during which my participants used the images to collage and explain their perception of current farming and their ideal scenarios. Lastly, I organized the data into patterns and created composite images from the 10 most ideal and 10 least ideal photographs. Three versions were created with different data subsets.

## PARTICIPANTS

Twelve individuals participated in the study. Ten interviews were conducted with non-farmer consumers in London, U.K., and two were conducted with farmers in rural Illinois, U.S.A. I chose participants with likely heightened interest in the farming and food production discourse and whom I already was acquainted.

The participants ranged in age from early 20s to 70s; three were male; and their heritage included American, British, Irish, Polish and Swedish. Two were retired; one worked for a government agriculture agency; one worked in public relations; two worked in food retail; one was a university student; two worked in corporate finance; one worked in tourism; and one worked in alternative medicine. Eight recalled family elders farming in the past; two currently farm. Three have been or are currently vegetarian. Five have children.



## LEAST IDEAL

Below is a layered image made from the photographs ranked as least ideal by all the participants. The very least ideal is the top thumbnail. This composite looks rather muddy and mostly is made up of animals in confined spaces without grass. Elements of the individual pictures are also fairly uniform.

The composite illustrates that the participants do not imagine animals being raised this way nor think in terms of commodities being produced. The negative comments participants made regarding these images were about 'mass production,' being 'focused on profit' and looking 'not natural or nice.'



## MOST IDEAL

The large image below represents the mental image of ideal farming by all the participants, and the most ideal image is the top thumbnail. The composite displays that the participants imagine ideal farming as having animals grazing in lush green spaces and farmers intimately checking on and caring for their animals and crops.

This corresponds to remarks they made while sorting the images. Many participants commented that images looking 'natural' and showing the farmer 'caring' matched what they imagine.





## CONSUMERS

Both composites on this page are made from the non-farmer consumer data set. The top is the most ideal, with the top left thumbnail being the very most ideal. The ranking goes down and then to the second column.

The bottom composite is least ideal, and the very least ideal thumbnail is again the top left.

As most participants were in this category, it is not surprising the images are similar to those created with all the data shown on the previous pages.



## FARMERS

These images are made from the farmer data set. The top is the most ideal and the bottom is the least ideal. The thumbnails are also arranged top-to-bottom, then left-to-right.

Comparing the farmer data set with the consumer data set produces stark contrast, as anticipated. Some images were ideal to consumers and not ideal to farmers and the opposite. The farmers chose images that represented progress, efficiency and productivity (harvest) as ideal, and chose images that looked like 'hobby farming' or 'gardening' as not ideal.



## CONCLUSIONS

Patterns in the data became quite apparent after creating the layered, composite images. The results specifically confirm what Gong says in *Food Words* about the image the public has of how food should be produced:

*“In more recent food advertisements reflecting moral values of food consumption, a prominent theme has been ‘natural,’ ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ food production. New Zealand lamb, woodland chicken and free-range, grass-grazing dairy cows have created imaginary spaces for consumers to fill in symbolic values such as sustainability” (2013: 132).*

Similarly, the results also confirm findings from a study performed with livestock farms in Norway and The Netherlands:

*“The farmer has an important role as a person who has not only professional knowledge but also emotions and affection, and hence ‘morals’. In this way, the ‘sensitive’ farmer maintains the humane face of agriculture. Their emotions prevent a purely instrumental handling of animals and nature and they assure ‘care’ for animals and nature. The ethical aspect of ‘care’ is emphasized here, and expressed in terms of the farmers’ love for animals and the link between the farm and the family” (Boogaard, et al 2010: 45).*

The results of this study beg for further research, specifically to compare these consumers with American city-dwellers and to explore deeper into why the two groups seem to view profitability and efficient production in such different manners.

Boogaard et al (2010) “Visiting a Farm: An Exploratory Study of the Social Construction of Animal Farming in Norway and the Netherlands.” *Jrnl. of Soc. of Agr. & Food*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 24–50.

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