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Cultivating Dialogue: Sustainable Agriculture and Masculinities

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It is a typical late spring morning in the Iowa heartland—a sunny day in the high 60s is forecast, a welcome respite from the last two weeks of rain. Snapping off the weather channel, Kyle Jenson¹ bolts out the kitchen door, straps on his boots, and hurriedly feeds and checks the hogs. With only a two-day window before the next rain, he is itching to fire up his John Deere 8780 tractor and set up his new no-till drill for planting soybeans in his back sixty, a field he and his father at one time plowed with horses. Kyle’s wife, Wendy, is already folding laundry, paying the bills, and planning “dinner” (the middle meal of the day for many rural Iowans). She is also getting ready to go to work at her off-farm job in the afternoon, but she will hold off on dinner and going to work until Kyle is ready to take a break. Knowing Kyle will be hungry and tired when he gets back in, Wendy fixes a solid meal: porkburgers, pork and beans, and bread and butter, with milk to top it off. She is eager to hear how far he gets this morning, how wet the ground is, and how well the equipment is holding up. At this time of year Wendy always worries about Kyle pushing to do all the planting by himself—often well past dark—only stopping for the one meal and to refill his planter with seed.

This spring scene plays out all over Iowa. The division of labor on the typical Iowa farm is gendered: men do most of the outdoor work, and women support their hectic schedules by providing meals at odd hours, doing chores, running the household, running for tractor parts, and work-

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ing at off-farm jobs—not to mention taking care of the children and doing everything else the men do not have time for. But although women play an integral role in Iowa agriculture, it is the men who most often claim the identity of “farmer.”

Beginning in 1995, we set out to understand the social conditions of sustainable agriculture in Iowa through a participatory qualitative study of farm households that are members of Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), Iowa’s principal sustainable agriculture group, and their non-PFI neighbors.² In this chapter, we report on one dimension of these conditions: the connection between ideologies of masculinity and the transition to sustainable agriculture. We argue that most male farmers’ conventional masculinity hinders the transition from industrial to sustainable agriculture. By extension, the success of the sustainable agriculture movement depends, in part, on providing a social and an ecological arena in which men may discover and perform different masculinities.

Kyle Jenson’s masculine performance, described in the opening vignette, represents what we call *monologic masculinity*, a single-voiced, conventional masculinity with rigid expectations and strictly negotiated performances that clearly differentiate between men’s and women’s work. Monologic masculinity also limits the range of topics deemed appropriate for men and women to discuss, regulates a specific definition of what constitutes work and success, and recognizes precise boundaries of manhood—including, in farming, appropriate relationships to farming processes, the environment, and animals.

A different scenario, however, is becoming more prevalent in Iowa among male PFI farmers. *Dialogic masculinity* presents a broader, more open, multivoiced understanding of what it is to be a man. Dialogic masculinity allows people more scope to talk about making mistakes, to express emotions, to accept change and criticism, to embrace a less controlling attitude toward machines and the environment, and to experiment with different measures of work and success.

The distinction between monologic and dialogic masculinity is an analytical tool, not a dichotomy. No rigid boundary separates the two; they are what Max Weber once called “ideal types.”³ Kyle Jenson is not purely monologic; no one is. Each male farmer experiences a constant tension between monologic and dialogic masculinity. But overall, those farmers in our study who practice industrial agriculture (capital intensive, low management, and low environment and community commitment) exhibited a

more monologic masculinity, while those farmers who lean more toward sustainability (less capital intensive, higher management, and higher environmental and community commitment) exhibited a more dialogic masculinity.⁴

Of course, ideas of masculinity have a close association with ideas of femininity, and one might reasonably ask why we emphasize masculinity in this chapter. Is not everything already about men?

Perhaps our first answer to this important question is that, given this close association, we could not have done this research had there not already been studies of rural and farm *women*.⁵ We are grateful to previous researchers for creating a space for this study of masculinities within agriculture. Moreover, our research is not simply a study of *men*; gender is socially organized, socially constructed, and negotiated in everyday interaction, so it involves both women and men.⁶ As Berit Brandth puts it, “Femininity exists only in relation to masculinity and vice versa.”⁷ To study masculinity is to study a central factor in the lives of both rural men and rural women. Through this study, we can then offer some analytic tools necessary for critiquing the current expressions of masculinity in agriculture.

Dialogue and Masculinities

There is not one masculinity in agriculture (or in any other field of human endeavor) but many *masculinities*. Most researchers in the sociology of masculinity agree, and Robert Connell has perhaps most forcefully argued, that masculinity is a social construction. Therefore, it is a product of the multiple social contexts and structures that do the constructing.⁸ Masculinity, then, is as variable as social and environmental contexts themselves.

Building from the Russian social theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, we can apply the distinction between monologic and dialogic modes of behavior to social contexts themselves, so we examine monologic social conditions and dialogic social conditions. In the former, we tend more to speak and act without acknowledging others—their words, their wishes, indeed sometimes their very presence—in anything more than a superficial and objectified way.⁹ We conceive of the world as divided along precise, rigid, and generally hierarchical boundaries, a separateness of individual actors and discrete categories. In dialogic conditions, however, social actors seek to

*take each other into account.*¹⁰ We maintain an openness to others' concerns and views; we envision our place in social life as an interactive part of the constantly changing whole; and we regard our categories and language with a similarly open and interactive outlook.

Bakhtin suggests understanding the distinction between the two types dialogically. Any one social situation is likely to have both monologic and dialogic elements, just as we in our own lives from time to time lean more one way or the other depending on our social histories, interactions, social structures, and cultures. Indeed, pure monologue is not possible. By the same token, pure dialogue is unlikely, and perhaps impossible. Bakhtin suggests, however, that a preponderance of monologue is more common in many spheres of social life.¹¹

We extend his work here as a device for understanding the culture of masculinity—or, more precisely, the cultures of masculinities—in an agroecology context. Just as social life has its monologic and dialogic sides, so does masculinity. We are not claiming that the distinction between monologic masculinity and dialogic masculinity describes all features of masculinities. However, our fieldwork suggests that this distinction describes many of the differences in the masculine ideologies of more industrially inclined farmers and those of more sustainably inclined farmers in Iowa. The sustainable agriculture movement is more strongly dialogic not only in the social conditions it promotes but also in the social lives of those attracted to it. It emphasizes a less individualistic, less categorical, less homogeneous approach to farming than more traditional models, and thus a more interactive and holistic outlook. At least in its rhetoric, sustainable agriculture emphasizes a way of farming that attends to and takes into account the needs of others in society and the physical environment.

In other words, sustainable agriculture is dialogic not only in masculinities but also in the interaction between farmers and the environment.¹² Industrial agriculture, on the other hand, is more monologic in masculinities as well as in other areas.¹³

The sustainable agriculture movement consequently provides farm men with an ecologically grounded arena for discovering and performing a more dialogic masculinity. As Erving Goffman and Judith Butler suggest, gender is a performance that requires an audience and the assistance of other persons on and off stage.¹⁴ While the metaphor of performance is a useful analytic device, focusing only on the performers potentially obscures the social structures and power relations involved in the drama of

social life (as many have complained of a Goffmanesque analysis).¹⁵ Performances generally involve other players, stagehands, and an audience, but these people may not be willingly involved in the performance of masculinity, particularly as the masculine actor is often both the scriptwriter and the theater paymaster, ensuring a production that meets his performance standards.

It is also important to note that the masculine actor may not himself perform altogether willingly; while he may have considerable power, he rarely has complete control over the script or the theater payroll. *Structures of performance* shape every social act. Farming is an infamously uncertain source of livelihood and thus of social identity, and farm men often find that their financial worth and sense of self-worth hangs in precarious balance. Consequently, performing masculinities within agri(culture) becomes a constant struggle, regardless of whether men conceive of masculinity in more monological or more dialogical terms.

The Gendered Landscape of Fieldwork in Iowa

Qualitative research methodologies have been criticized for using “top-down” approaches in which the academic researcher is the sole authority behind the representation of the evidence.¹⁶ In response, many methodologists are calling for more reflexive and participatory approaches that involve the researched in the process of research, gaining the benefit of the perspectives of both those inside and those outside the research subject.¹⁷

With these critiques in mind, we triangulated our fieldwork with a four-person team composed of both “insiders” and “outsiders.” Each member of the research team brought to the project different levels of familiarity with Iowa, with agriculture, and with PFI. Both Susan Jarnagin and Donna Bauer have long associations with PFI, Jarnagin as the spouse of a PFI founder and longtime PFI employee, and Bauer as a PFI board member and farmer. In contrast, Michael Bell and Gregory Peter were relative newcomers to Iowa agriculture and rural life. Our team also represented insiders and outsiders with regard to masculinity: two men and two women.

Since it emerged in 1985 during the midst of the 1980s farm crisis, PFI has developed into Iowa’s principal farmer-based sustainable agriculture organization. Membership in 2005 stands at about 750 members, about half of whom farm. One distinctive and pioneering feature of the group is

its focus on “on-farm research,” in which farmers do their own scientific trials, often in collaboration with university researchers. PFI sponsors annual field days at member farms that participate in the trials, and these field days have been an important means of promoting sustainable agriculture in Iowa and the state’s universities. PFI provides the organizational structure for exchanging information through regional and statewide meetings, a quarterly newsletter, and a network connecting sustainable farmers throughout the state. The group also works on a range of projects in the development of food systems, such as alternative forms of marketing, consumer education, and connecting local food with local chefs.

As a team, we conducted taped interviews with 108 individuals from thirty-five PFI households and thirty-four non-PFI households. The bulk of the initial interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 1996. Follow-up interviewing and participation with farmers continued until 2000. We often asked to interview men and women together in their homes, but sometimes gate-keeping by the male farmer kept the interview to only one participant from the farm family. Every participant also gave us a farm tour that sometimes developed into a neighborhood or community tour.¹⁸

Beyond the taped interviews, we came to know the farm households in more informal ways, through farm stays of varying lengths. We ironed, cooked, ran errands, got groceries, and evaluated antiques. We helped bale hay, plant beans, slaughter chickens, fix refrigerators, repair jammed augers and planter wheels, feed horses, and chase down escaped livestock. We ate meals, watched television, took care of children, played the fiddle, shot basketballs, visited neighbors, and sometimes spent the night on participating farms. We also regularly attended PFI meetings and field days.

Iowa has more prime agricultural soil than any other state in the United States and the highest percentage of land under cultivation. First the plow, then mechanization, then hybrid seed corn transformed the prairie into a prime agricultural landscape and then into a highly industrialized, commercialized, and internationally recognized commodity. Agriculture is Iowa’s principal industry and primary source of regional identity, as the current state slogan suggests (“Iowa, Fields of Opportunities”). To maximize industrial fields of opportunity in Iowa, most historical fencerows were taken out. A more metaphorical fence, however, was constructed in their place—a fence that still separates farm families from their neighbors. Monologue is the fence. If sustainable agriculture is to have an effect on

farming, it has to succeed here on the home front of agricultural industrialization—and of conventional agricultural masculinity.

Gender and Farm Talk

As in other male-dominated professions, the language of agriculture is highly gendered. We consistently heard male and female farmers in Iowa using gendered terminology when discussing agriculture. Danny, a recent graduate in agronomy from Iowa State University and a non-PFI farmer, is comfortable using this kind of language. Danny farms with his father, Dan, growing hundreds of acres of corn for a seed company. His mother, Sarah, does not consider herself a farmer but is actively involved in “the business.” Greg interviewed Danny (who still dressed like a college student), Dan (who wore work overalls and a feed cap), and Sarah (who wore dress slacks and a blouse), in their newly remodeled farm kitchen. They talked a bit about family and student life; Greg then asked Danny to describe the difference between “conventional” and “sustainable” agriculture. Danny replied: “Conventional farming to me is you take that plow out there and black her up. Like over there in that field [pointing to a field recently plowed by a seed company]. You black her up and you know that’s the way it was done maybe thirty to forty years ago.” The pronouns Danny uses refer to the land as female and as something “you” control; “you black her up.” His father agreed and continued the line of thought: “Seed companies are out there for their own self and they don’t care who they rape, including the land.” To these men, then, there are farmers who “rape” the earth, and there are those that treat the land the way “she” should be treated. While Sarah participated in the rest of the interview, she did not use the same language that Danny and Dan used. Overall, we found that women generally refrained from using this kind of language.¹⁹

Kay and Jerry, an older non-PFI couple, followed a similar linguistic pattern when Sue interviewed them at the small place they have farmed for many years. Sue asked Jerry why he liked to farm, a question he immediately warmed to. “I’ve done a great many things in my years, but I’ve always left one foot solidly on the ground as a farmer,” he said. “As I’ve said once before, all things come from the ground. So if all [other] things go sour, we can live off the land.”

Kay also warmed to the topic (although she later told Sue she does not

consider herself a farmer). “A real farmer,” said Kay, “can’t wait to get out in spring to turn that ol’ sod and smell that soil, just like a gardener.”

Jerry took up the conversation again, but with a significant shift of metaphor: “It gives you a feeling that you’re going to impregnate this earth, and I’m going to harvest it next fall.”

For Kay, a real farmer is like a gardener, appreciating the gender-neutral sensuousness of sod and smell. But for Dan, Danny, and Jerry, the imagery of farming is about impregnating and sometimes even raping a female land—metaphors that culturally support male dominance in agriculture and over the environment in general—even when they contest patterns of dominance, as Dan and Danny did. Not only is the land female, and often violently controlled, but the “farmer” is almost always male.

Although women in the study usually did not use gendered imagery to describe farm practices, they did typically use gendered categories of farming identity. We often asked the couples we interviewed if the woman on the farm was a “farmer.” Despite their extensive participation in agricultural production, few women considered themselves “farmers” or were considered “farmers” by men.²⁰ Take the case of Diana, who puts in twenty hours a week, sometimes more, working with her husband on their farm. Mike asked if she would consider herself a farmer.

“I wouldn’t mind it,” Diana replied. “I just don’t consider that I do enough farm work to be a farmer.”

“Part-time farmer?” Mike asked.

“Part-time farmer, I suppose. But once again Frank’s in charge. He’s the farmer. I’m the helper. I’m the homemaker and farm hand.”

Through interviews, farm stays, and return visits, we discovered that in Iowa most farm women “help” on the farm, just as some men “help” in the home. With women as “helpers,” the category of farmer remains the exclusive domain of men’s work not only in the eyes of the community but within the family as well.

“A Guy Can’t Be Afraid of Getting Dirty”

Greg was reintroduced to the social and environmental performances of masculinities early one spring morning by Leonard, an older non-PFI farmer with a small hog confinement operation. Expecting a tour of Leonard’s farm plus some hands-on farming experience, Greg came dressed in

clean but faded jeans, a T-shirt, work boots, and an Iowa State University baseball cap. Leonard, dressed in work overalls and a well-worn seed cap, evidently regarded Greg's appearance as too scrubbed and collegiate for a farmer—or so the subsequent dramatics suggest. The tour eventually led to the farrowing house of Leonard's hog confinement operation. After showing Greg the feeding equipment, Leonard walked over to the manure pit, unzipped, and urinated into the pit. "Being a farmer, I'm more comfortable pissin' out here than inside," he told Greg, nodding back toward the house.

Later, when they entered another part of the building, Leonard yelled, "Pigs out!" A mother sow had knocked open the door on her confinement pen and six piglets had escaped, falling into the manure pit below. Leonard jumped into action. Partly out of a concern for the animals, and partly out of concern for creating a favorable impression, Greg jumped in with him. Greg's job was to grab the manure-spattered blade of a spade and poke the wooden handle down through the steel grating to guide the drowning piglets to the side of the pit, where Leonard had a little wire lasso attached to a stick. Leonard snagged a piglet leg with the lasso, hauled the piglet squealing onto the concrete floor, and then went back for another. In the end, two of the six piglets survived the ordeal. Leonard looked approvingly at Greg, who was now properly soiled; and after a futile attempt at washing up with a hose, Leonard offered him a ride in his truck to see the rest of his farm. (Previously Leonard had not planned to give Greg the whole tour of the farm.) He told Greg in the truck that "a guy can't be afraid of getting dirty."

These performances by both Leonard and Greg were homosocial statements of the sharply bounded monologic masculinity we often encountered in the fieldwork. Several cultural oppositions underlay their performance—dirtiness versus cleanliness; outside versus inside; danger versus safety; farmer versus nonfarmer; and male versus female. Initially, Greg seemed to play the counterrole of the less masculine man. Through his successfully performed rite of passage, however, he managed to cross the boundary into manly manhood, becoming a man among men who are not afraid of getting dirty, of relieving themselves outdoors, or of performing dangerous and unpleasant tasks.

When the monologic male denies himself bodily comforts in this way, he reinforces not only his view of himself but also his view of others. Greg and Leonard enacted this denial of the other (the feminine, the indoor,

and the sanitized) homosocially, but farmers in our study also enacted it in heterosocial situations. Ron, a younger non-PFI farmer, manages thousands of acres and is well known in his community for his huge tractors, sixty-foot-wide planter, and punishing work schedule. He seemed to take pride in telling Donna, during an interview with him and his wife, Nancy, how during planting season he and his hired men work “around the clock.”

Donna asked, “So does that mean one person puts in a shift of ten hours?”

“No,” Ron replied. “It means one person puts in a shift of about forty-eight hours.”

“Go till you drop?” Donna offered.

“Pretty much,” he said laughing. “We just hope when a guy drops you hit your head, and it brings you around so you can get back up and go some more.”

It seemed to Donna an expression Ron had used before (perhaps also in the presence of men). With it, Ron presents the heterosocial image of a manly man who relishes hard work and is able to deny himself bodily comfort—and is also monologically capable of denying others’ comfort. Monologic ascetic denial also involves not eating while working. While helping non-PFI farmers, both Mike and Greg participated in this monologic approach to work—long periods on the tractor or the combine without food or drink. They were being culturally introduced to the manly world of “hard work.” As an agricultural television advertisement in Iowa from the fall of 1997 proudly proclaimed, “farmers invented hard work.” Most male farmers in our study, PFI and non-PFI alike, relished this image and its accompanying rituals.

Male PFI farmers, however, more frequently enacted dialogic moderation and concern for the comfort of others in work situations. For example, one afternoon, Greg was riding on the wheel well of a 1967 John Deere tractor cultivating soybeans with John, a younger PFI farmer with a small farm. They had already been out for a few hours and John (querying whether Greg had to be anywhere) asked, “What’s your time frame like?” It was about 5:30 P.M., not late. Greg did actually need to get home to his family but remained monologically noncommittal. John said, “I tell you what Greg, I need to go home and get something to eat. I really haven’t eaten that much today.” On the surface, there is nothing surprising about such a comment. But Greg had the distinct feeling that John was kindly

giving him a face-saving excuse to go home, by saying that he, John, was the one who needed to stop. Although enacted against a monologic cultural background in which face needed to be saved, this interchange manifested the communal orientation of dialogic masculinity—a greater concern about others’ needs and feelings, like being hungry and tired.

Controlling Nature and a Not-So-Silent Spring

Farm men’s fascination with big machines that control the environment is a well-known aspect of rural culture. Indeed, as Brandth notes: “The masculinization of farming became particularly marked after the mechanization of agriculture.”²¹ Male farmers do the overwhelming majority of outdoor fieldwork, the work that everyone can see and that other men homosocially seldom fail to notice even when sliding precariously down a loose gravel road in an old pickup truck. Both PFI and non-PFI men in our study often expressed fascination with heavy outdoor machinery. But PFI farmers also expressed reservations about the cultural implications of the “big iron” mentality, as one PFI farmer derisively described it. Instead, PFI men often described the value of a less controlling orientation to the land and to animals—a more dialogic approach.

Take, for example, Ted, a PFI member who is moving away from standard corn and beans row-crop agriculture on his small farm. He told Mike that he has trouble talking with farmers who are mostly interested in machinery and owning thousands of acres: “I feel uncomfortable getting in with the other crowd, so to speak, because mainly what they talk about is machinery. The new this. The new that. How many acres I’m farming or, you know, this or that or whatever. You know, I couldn’t care less. I don’t have any interest in that stuff.”

But this sort of outlook toward machines can isolate farm men from their neighbors, and thus an important feature of PFI is that it provides social, structural, and cultural support for this less mechanized masculinity—a place for different kinds of conversations. As Frank, another PFI member, puts it: “PFI is the one farm organization that I belong to that I really have lively interest in. . . . They aren’t going big. They aren’t excited by the big machinery and the big new stuff.”

PFI farmers are not oblivious to the monologic attractions of “going big” and enjoying more control over nature, as John, a third PFI farmer,

explained: “I always look forward to cultivating because it’s that control thing—it’s controlling nature. You get out there with your machinery, and you cut up those weeds with that machinery, and it feels good.” He continued: “You see the end result immediately. When you plant, it’s weeks before you see what you planted; here, it’s instant gratification.” Although John clearly enjoys cultivating, he is also self-conscious about “controlling nature.” He admits he enjoys it but wishes he could overcome “that control thing.”

In a culture dominated by a monologic orientation, it is often difficult to maintain a dialogic masculinity. A farmer who lets go of the “big iron” mentality also lets go of a well-established cultural repertoire of self-esteem—and power. The subject of machinery safety and chemicals came up in the conversation between John, his father, Harold, Roger, and Greg. Harold brought up *Silent Spring* (the landmark text on chemical environmental degradation) and said of author Rachel Carson: “There may be something to what she said in *Silent Spring*; it may not be silent, but it sure is happening.”

Mike observed similar reactions when he went out to work with George, an older PFI farmer with a corn and soybean operation in southwest Iowa. When Mike arrived, George and his twelve-year-old son, Thomas, were changing the planter over from corn to beans. This required unbolting the corn seed wheels and rebolting the bean ones. George was reluctant to let Mike help at first because the corn seed was “treated.” Mike was looking at the planter wheels, which still carried a fair bit of grain stained purple from antifungal treatment. George looked over at Mike and said, “I’ve got enough of this stuff under my skin already; we don’t need to spread it around.” He then talked about how next year the companies were going to come out with some antifungal treatment that was not so bad for people, which he thought was a good thing: “They’re starting to realize that they’ve got to pay attention to the health of the farmer too.” While George represents dialogic masculinity in many other areas, he has a more monologic approach when handling chemicals (wearing protective clothing when working on the farm is “unmanly”). After working on the planter, however, George did make sure afterward that everyone went to wash up at an external hose (not an inside sink) where he had a bar of soap waiting. While George himself had taken the worst job—cleaning out the “boxes” of the remaining corn seed, which required quite a bit of contact with the treated seed—he focused particularly on his son: “Now Thomas, make

sure you wash up good,” he insisted. On the one hand, George was being very sensitive to the health impact of treated seed and protecting his son and guest from it. On the other, his comment that he already had “enough of this stuff under my skin” showed his own willingness to handle such risks, lest there be any question about it.

Ron, a younger non-PFI farmer, has a strong opinion about chemical use and environmentalists. When interviewed, he told Mike that “in the environmental business people are pushing things. I’m afraid down the road if things don’t straighten around, they’re going to push us out of using chemicals . . . you can’t farm that way. Our productivity, it’ll go to crap.” There was no fear of chemicals here, no ambivalence or categorical complexity that the acceptance of multiple voices encourages. And although no farmer expressed it explicitly, we could not help at times hearing monologic echoes of concern for virility and masculine control in the focus on productivity typical of Ron and other non-PFI farmers.

On the other side of the fence, more sustainable farmers are excited about using fewer chemicals and increasing safety on their farms. Safety, for instance, came up in Greg’s interview with Joan and Mark Hilson. Joan picked up on it first, saying that another favorable aspect of sustainable farming was that “our eight-year-old can be involved. He’s out there moving fences with him. I don’t know if you can say that about crop farming. How many kids are involved [in that]? And now you know these herbicides and chemicals are dangerous stuff. Your kids can’t be involved in that; and you don’t want your kids around there.” Mark then chimed in with: “Well, that’s exciting and before the grass thing [rotational grazing] I would have told him, ‘don’t even bother thinking about farming.’ Now, I see there is a way he can get into it if he wants to down the road—that’s the great thing.”

Husbands and Husbandry

While big machines and strong chemicals in Iowa monologically define masculinity, certain types of livestock (such as raising broiler hens) are more monologically associated with femininity, at least stereotypically. Sustainable agriculture of the sort promoted by PFI, however, usually depends on incorporating these types of livestock into the farm operation, as well as diversifying production and adding value. The “big iron” view of

farming is thus culturally incompatible with the ideology of sustainability—or so PFI members Jim and Jerilyn (mainly Jim) explained to Mike. Jim and Jerilyn are a middle-aged couple who run a small diversified farm with several crops in addition to the usual corn and soybeans, as well as three different livestock operations.

“I think having animals around humbles a person,” Jim began. “I think it humbles you because . . .”

“You got to go out and scoop poop,” interjected Jerilyn.

“And you know sometimes they die,” continued Jim. “Sometimes [even if you] do everything right, there’ll be some other factor come in like a weather change. Or something will make them sick. Where cash grain tends to be more ‘blow black smoke with big power’ and ‘cover a wide swath.’ It’s more of a power trip or image of authority: ‘I can do this because I’ve got 400 horsepower under the tractor, and I can make sixty feet black.’ Or something like that. It’s more of a machinery-dominating thing. Where having animals, you don’t dominate them the way you dominate land. Animals are much more humbling because they’re just harder—harder to control.”

Jim and Jerilyn support a different masculine performance here, a masculinity that is distinctive in appreciating the humbling lack of control brought by animals and the livestock business—a lack of control that Jim dialogically feels he does not need to deny.²²

Enhancing Ecological Dialogue

Although male PFI farmers expressed ambivalence about giving up environmental and social control, they were more willing than non-PFI farmers to do so. In this section we discuss the greater social openness of PFI men, especially with regard to dialogue within the family, the community, and the environment.

To begin, it is important to note the infamously uncertain character of farming. As Carl, a non-PFI member who used to grow seed corn, explained to Mike: “[In] the business of farming . . . a person has to be very optimistic. You wouldn’t dare get into farming if you weren’t an optimist because you have everything thrown at you. The markets which you have no control over. You got Mother Nature which you have no control over. You have insects you have no control over. What the government does you

have no control over. There's so many factors out there that the farmer has no control over."

This struggle to survive in farming is in part a cultural struggle between masculinities and sustainability. Farmers who are less in control of their resource management, less productive, and less successful may present less masculine selves than other farmers. One defensive response to agriculture's uncertain structures of masculine performance, therefore, is to assert a rigid, oppositional, and socially controlling masculinity—a strongly monologic masculinity.

Although PFI men may also attempt the hierarchical satisfactions of monologic control, we were often struck in our fieldwork by their struggle to perform a more socially open masculinity. One example is John, a PFI farmer discussed earlier, who with his family recently participated in a holistic management (HM) workshop. HM is a decision-making approach that has become very popular among PFI members and others in the sustainable agriculture movement. HM provides farmers with a decision-making template that takes into account the social, economic, and environmental implications of farm practices, based on each family member's values and goals. Central to the HM approach, then, is collective decision making within the family. In other words, HM promotes a multivoiced, dialogic masculinity.

As John explained to Greg: "Well, one thing, by trying to use it [HM] you realize, boy, you got to learn how to cooperate with people. That's a big part of it. Learning cooperation even within the family. Getting everybody tuned into the goals. Well, I'll point out to you that we just did that two weeks ago. We made our own family goal. We sat around for two hours one Sunday night with the kids and we said, 'Well what do we want this family to be like, and what do we want to do?'"

It is interesting to note that John said "even within the family," indicating his view that family cooperation is unusual. In making this observation, John is trying to redefine his masculinity within the family context, as are many PFI men.²³

PFI provides an important social support structure for this more dialogic masculinity. Among the places where we saw this support was in one of PFI's "Shared Visions" community-building groups. Mike regularly visited a Shared Visions group that focused each meeting on how to improve the farm practices of a different couple in the group. The frank, friendly criticism of the group had been a particular challenge for male

participants, but also a great relief. It is hard to keep up a constant façade of control, especially in difficult times where simple mistakes can cost dearly. As one middle-aged farmer, Brad, remarked during a meeting: “You know, you feel like a fish out of water, flopping around. And this Shared Visions group helped me through that a bit.”

Sharon, usually rather shy and awkward in the group, burst into the conversation. “I just want to say,” she said, looking across the room at Brad, “what you said about being a fish out of water—that was a hard thing, especially for a man, to say. That says a lot about what’s good about this group. That we can say these things.” By reinforcing Brad’s openness to expressing his feelings to the group, she is also reinforcing dialogic masculinity and communality within the group.

An important element of admitting lack of control in farming is a dialogic openness to admitting mistakes that others can learn from. Brian, a PFI member, explained to Mike the difference he finds between PFI members and other farmers:

People will share. They’re willing to talk about their successes and their failures. They like to share with people. [With other organizations] you hear about the successes but nobody ever wants to talk about their failures. Even the neighbor down the road. You can go down there, and he might let you know about his success. . . . The simple fact [is] that he’d like to boost his ego up a little bit. But he’ll never tell you about that mistake he made back on the back forty which nobody ever would see.

PFI men often described to us the importance of sharing ideas, providing emotional support, sharing labor, and other forms of community building. While non-PFI men were not necessarily silent on these topics, most did not emphasize them to the same degree as PFI men—and certainly not to the degree that Jim did when he went so far as to praise lack of control as a positive benefit of livestock farming. With livestock, he explained: “You’re more dependent on a feed dealer. You’re dependent more on a veterinarian. You’re dependent more on your plumber, your electrician. You’re dependent more on people. You work with a lot more people in livestock production than you do in cash grain.”

In these and other ways, PFI men present a more socially open masculine performance. They are not always so dialogic, nor are non-PFI men

completely monologic. But part of what many PFI men find attractive about their organization's structure and culture is the support it gives them to be more dialogic and still just as masculine as the guy standing in the field next door.

Back Across the Fence?

On the whole, Iowa farm families still maintain traditional gender roles and masculine identities. However, the transition to sustainable agriculture seems to be accompanied by changes in masculinity. Specifically, we see a shift from monologic to dialogic masculinity, as the oppositional character of monologic masculinity fits poorly with sustainable agriculture's emphasis on openness to social and environmental change. But cultural opportunities for social change exist even within monologic structures of performance: as Bakhtin optimistically points out, there is no such thing as a pure monologue. Moreover, most of the PFI and non-PFI farm men in our study showed a dialogic side—some, of course, more than others. Men with a more dialogic conception of their masculinity appear to support and be supported by an organization like PFI. As Anthony Giddens put it, a “duality of structure” is at work here, with dialogic masculinity working in consort with its organizational structures.²⁴

We also suggest that for men, the struggle to survive in farming is simultaneously a struggle to cultivate an ecological dialogue between masculinities and sustainability. This is no less true for male sustainable farmers than it is for male industrial farmers. In fact, for these men, accepting a less polarized masculinity may be an essential element in the future viability of sustainable agriculture. Practical farmers need a practical identity. They need an identity with flexible boundaries and one that opens up (agri)cultural space for other voices and other ways of farming—including the voices of the environment and of animals.

Women's voices in farming are also of particular sociological importance. While we still cannot describe women's voices in PFI as being as loud as men's, they are certainly increasing in volume. As we write, three of the group's ten elected and two ex-officio board members are women. These include two of PFI's three officers: the treasurer and the group's first woman president—both of whom are self-described farmers. The growth of community-supported agriculture and interest in direct market-

ing, areas of agriculture with greater female representation, has also given women more prominence in the group. Outside PFI, women have played a central role in developing the sustainable agriculture movement at all levels: national, regional, on- and off-farm, and in-home. Across the state and country, women are better represented and more prominent in sustainable agricultural organizations than in industrial agricultural organizations. For example, as we write, twenty-six men and no women sit on the board of directors of the aptly named Iowa Cattlemen's Association—the state's main beef commodity association, and a bastion of industrial agriculture.

Our analysis of PFI suggests this is not accidental. Dialogic masculinity opens up the conversation—not only between women and men but also between men and men, and between men, women, and the land. In one male farmer's words, this type of group “has brought us back across the fence.” Yes . . . and no. While we share this farmer's optimism, the development of dialogic masculinity, like sustainable agriculture itself, is still in its early stages. Men and women need to cultivate deeper dialogic relations with each other and the earth. In other words, we are still *coming* back across the fence—but that is nevertheless welcome news indeed.

NOTES

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms and all inessential farm characteristics and physical attributes have been changed to maintain strict confidentiality.

2. The results of the full study can be found in Bell et al. (2004).

3. Weber (1978).

4. Theoretically it is important to note that not only does sustainable ideology lead to more dialogic masculinity, but dialogic masculine identities are more drawn toward sustainable practices. For more on our distinctions between industrial and sustainable agriculture, see Bell et al. (2004).

5. Chiappe and Flora (1998); Meares (1997); Knobloch (1996); Brandth (1994a); Barlett (1993); Fink (1987).

6. Connell (1995a); Kessler and McKenna (1978).

7. Brandth (1994a, 130).

8. Connell (1995a).

9. Bakhtin (1981, 1986).

10. M. Bell (1998a).

11. Bakhtin's work is explicitly normative—Bakhtin thinks monologue is bad. As such, his approach fits into a style of theory we might term *moral post-modernism*—social theory that abandons the modernist faith in the possibility of and the necessity for a separation of social science and values. Increasingly, critical and applied sociologists have been writing about the need for this abandonment, which in part accounts for the increasing popularity of a Bakhtinian approach. See Seidman (1994); Levine

(1995); M. Bell (1995); Warner and England (1995).

12. M. Bell (1998c, 4).

13. For more on this argument, see Bell et al. (2004).

14. Goffman (1959, 1979); Butler (1993). Also, Kimmel (1996) points out the commonly homosocial context of its performance. That is, men frequently direct their masculine performances with other men in mind. Masculinity may also be what, in parallel, we term heterosocial: performed with an audience of women in mind. It may also be both, in varying degrees. In any event, as Chodorow (1978) has argued, men in both their homosocial and heterosocial performances typically conceive masculinity as not feminine, a categorical opposition we regard as culturally monologic.

15. We are indebted to Jacqueline Litt, our colleague at Iowa State University, for this observation. A recommended resource on this issue is Reynolds (1990), chapter 9.

16. Clough (1992); Van Maanan (1988); Clifford (1986).

17. M. Bell (1998a); Gaventa (1993).

18. The interviews ranged in length from one hour to five and a half hours, and used what we call *co-structured* procedures—that is, they were open not only to the directions the researchers wanted to take but to the directions the participants wanted to take. This participatory technique increased the likelihood that the content of our interviews reflected more than the researchers' preconceptions.

19. For more ecofeminist analysis of agriculture, see Knobloch (1996).

20. This was the case when we interviewed couples jointly and separately.

21. Brandth (1994a, 131).

22. Reflexively Mike noted that Jim dominated this conversation, as he did most of the interview.

23. The reality may be that John used the occasion for "getting everybody tuned" in to his goals; we were not able to interview other family members on this point. But our impression is that he was making a concerted effort to be more open to others' opinions and less controlling.

24. Giddens (1984).