

Knowledge generation of new-entrance farmers observing and working with nature: Case study about Permaculture in Austria

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Background

In the Global North, the number of farms is constantly decreasing while the farm size per farm is increasing. At the same time, we face different environmental and social problems under the current socio-technical regime (Smith, 2006). While many farmers leave the job and young people don't want to take over the farm of their parents, some new-entrance farmers start their living from small-scale farming activities.

A recent study of farmers in the United States under the age of 40 years shows that three quarter of the young farmers did not grow up on a farm. Most of the survey respondents were highly educated and described their practices as "sustainable" (75 %) or "organic" (63 %), even they had no certificate (Ackoff, Bahrenburg, & Shute, 2017). Lynne Davis, a small-scale goat farmer and Via Campesina activist, described a similar situation in the United Kingdom. According to her, there are many new-entrance farmers in the UK. As many of these new-entrance farmers have no or little agricultural background, they often observe nature and learn from it.

Observing nature and working with nature not against natural forces is also one key principle of Permaculture. It was founded by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in the 1970s and became a worldwide movement. The term "permaculture" has its origin from "permanent agriculture", which was later extended to "permanent culture". A more recent definition describes permaculture as "Consciously designed landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fibre and energy for provision of local needs" (Holmgren, 2002, p. xix). Besides describing permaculture as design system, many people refer to "permaculture techniques" as i.e. composting, collecting rainwater and no-dig gardening, or "permaculture elements" such as i.e. the herb spiral, the food forest and the chicken tractor. Ferguson and Lovell (2014) summarize that by defining permaculture as a design system, a set of associated practices, a worldview and an international movement.

In recent years, permaculture became more and more popular and developed as a niche. Growing your own food and being independent from the market is one key aspect of many Permaculturalists. Thereby, it is not restricted anymore to small home-gardens and found its way also into agriculture. As the permaculture community is often isolated, the niche also created its own knowledge. This knowledge, as shared for example through books, oft does not correspond to current scientific research (Ferguson & Lovell, 2014).

In literature, it is generally distinct between two forms of knowledge: tacit (implicit) and codified (explicit) knowledge. While explicit knowledge can be easily documented and shared, implicit knowledge is gained through practice and experience. As much of permaculture is experiential and often associated as learning from nature, tacit knowledge has a key role in permaculture. Knowledge can be further differentiated into four kinds of knowledge, which

can be summarized as “know what” (i.e. information), “know why” (i.e. scientific knowledge), “know how” (i.e. skills) and “know who” (i.e. social skills).

In this study, I will look specifically at the knowledge about food production of permaculture new-entrance farmers in Austria. Thereby I will study the different forms of knowledge (tacit and codified) at distinct stages (e.g. beginning, failure).

Research questions

- What are the sources of knowledge? Who do the farmers access advice from?
- What can be learned from nature and for what is external advice taken? Is this changing over time?

Methods

The research will be conducted as qualitative research using semi-structured open ended questions. Through internet research and snowball technique, permaculture farmers in Upper- and Lower-Austria will be selected.

Literature:

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