

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES TO
COLLABORATION BETWEEN SMALL FARMERS AND VETERANS

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

By

Jennifer Marie Fusaro

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Environment and Community Program

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Social Science

(August, 2010)

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES TO
COLLABORATION BETWEEN SMALL FARMERS AND VETERANS

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

By

Jennifer Marie Fusaro

Approved by the Master's Thesis Committee:

Dr. Noah Zerbe, Major Professor Date

Dr. Joy Adams, Committee Member Date

Dr. Christian Itin, MSW, Committee Member Date

Dr. Mark Baker, Graduate Coordinator Date

Jena Burges Date
Vice Provost

ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION BETWEEN SMALL FARMERS AND VETERANS

Jennifer Marie Fusaro

Over the past few decades, the decline of small farmers in the United States has resulted in a dramatic loss of traditional farming knowledge. The introduction of industrial farming practices has led to a corporatized food system that makes it difficult for small farming to produce a viable livelihood. Meanwhile, over two million deployed American troops returning home from theaters of combat face significant challenges, including a slow and ineffective Veterans Administration, a limited job market, and a severely depressed economy.

Recently, a few organizations such as the Farmer-Veteran Coalition have begun to implement projects that bring together small farmers and Veterans to collaborate in unique ways that address many of the challenges for each group while simultaneously improving their respective communities. In this research, I explored with the participants the potential benefits and challenges of collaboration between small farmers and the Veteran community in Northern California. The research employed advocacy and participatory epistemology and methodologies, thereby offering a central place for the participants in the research. Qualitative interviews offered in depth opportunities to examine the experiences of farmers and Veterans who are (or are not) transformed by

collaboration. Using the Farmer-Veteran Coalition as a model of collaboration, the research indicates that interaction between Veterans and small farmers can indeed provide important benefits to both groups. However, significant challenges are common among participating individuals. Organizations focusing on such collaboration must identify and work with the Veteran and small farming communities to remove these barriers to success. The implications of this analysis are timely and potentially far reaching. Immediate improvements are possible in the individual lives of small farmers and Veterans as well as longer term policy changes that simultaneously promote care and support for the Veteran community and improve the fragile United States food system. Suggested specific outcomes are improvements in health care, employment rates, transition programs, and overall well-being for Veterans, in addition to strengthening local food supplies through the preservation of traditional farming knowledge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been an honor to participate in the Environment and Community Master's Program at Humboldt State University. I would like to thank my colleagues and my thesis committee – Dr. Noah Zerbe, Dr. Joy Adams, and Dr. Christian Itin, MSW – for their unwavering support and guidance. I would also like to thank my cohort for their enthusiastic encouragement and for the brave decision to mindfully create a respectful and joyful relationship with one other. Our thoughtful and sometimes challenging interactions in no small way contributed to the courage I needed to pursue this journey... a journey that is at once professionally poignant and personally moving. On this journey, I have had the pleasure and the privilege of interacting with individuals of the Veteran and the farming communities of Northern California. Their stories and insight have contributed immensely to the creation of this work, and have taught me much more than what is contained within these pages. For this, I offer my sincere gratitude. I also wish to thank the Farmer-Veteran Coalition for agreeing to participate in this research and for generously sharing time and resources. It is my hope that this research will lead to positive improvements in our Veteran and small farmer support systems. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family and friends for their patience and encouragement, including my partner, Shannon – who has shouldered more than his share of garden chores and pep talks over the last two years – I love you beyond measure. Any mistakes, of course, are entirely my own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	6
Identified Needs in the Farming Community	6
Identified Needs in the Veteran Community	7
The Role of Nature.....	11
The Need to Examine Farmer-Veteran Collaboration	12
METHODS	15
Epistemology	15
Methodology.....	17
Methods.....	19
FINDINGS	22
Challenges of Collaboration	24
Benefits of Collaboration.....	32
Group Analysis	42
CONCLUSION.....	45
Suggestions for Improvement – Farmer-Veteran Coalition.....	45
Suggestions for Improving Collaboration in General.....	47
Suggestions for Future Research	49
REFERENCES	51

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Challenges to Collaboration Identified by Interviewees.....	22
2	Benefits to Collaboration Identified by Interviewees.....	23

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Annual U.S. Unemployment Rate (in Percentages) for Ages 16+.....	8

INTRODUCTION

In the United States during the 1930s, there were over 7 million farms, but by the mid- 1990s only 1.8 million remained, and that number has been rapidly declining ever since. (Magdoff et. al., 2000: 13). The advent of the industrial model of farming has driven this loss (Berry, 1977). In a post-World War II world, the United States was eager to apply the theories of global capitalism to the task of drastically reshaping how people are fed. Industrial concepts of efficiency led to a model of food production that relied more on technology and petroleum, and less on the expertise of small farmers and generational memory of place. Consequently, the United States today produces 3,900 calories per person per day – significantly more than the USDA recommended average daily caloric intake – produced on much larger farms, with fewer farmers (Nestle, 2007: 11-13). Many small farmers in America long ago succumbed to the relentless competition of large agribusiness corporations, and the ones who remain constantly struggle to find creative ways to stay solvent. A number of scholars have written on the consequences of this shift, particularly for communities and for food sovereignty. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva (1997; 2000; 2005; 2007) and agrarian writers like Wendell Berry (1977; 1981; 2009) and E.F. Schumacher (1973: 108-124) have examined the rapid loss of traditional farming knowledge that has vanished with the small farmer and with the fundamental shift to industrial agriculture in the United States and across the globe. Exploring the vast amount of research that has already been conducted concerning this loss of vital knowledge, it is clear that the importance of preserving, regenerating,

and honoring farming knowledge – knowledge that connects ourselves and our communities to our food, to our place, and to each other – cannot be understated. Indeed, there are many projects and organizations in the United States and abroad that are attempting to address the need to re-localize our food systems and maintain invaluable generational knowledge about growing food locally. Communities have started Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, reinvested in farmers’ markets, participated in “locavore” challenges, and in general, have become more concerned about where their food comes from, how it is grown, and who grows it. This phenomenon is evident when examining the recent popularity of novels and accounts of “food journalism” that explore these topics of concern (Pollan, 2006 & 2008; Schlosser, 2001; Spurlock, 2006; Kingsolver, 2008). However, even with the renewed interest in local food systems and small farming, the United States and countries across the globe are continuing to lose their small farmers at an alarming rate. With this loss, we also lose intimate knowledge of the soil, water, vegetation, and ecology of their farms and communities – knowledge that is built on generations of careful observation, experimentation, and connection to a specific place – knowledge that is crucial to the survival of humans on this planet.

As America loses its small farmers, fewer and fewer young people are taking their places. Recruitment in rural communities by the military exacerbates this trend. The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) recently reported that men and women from geographically rural areas make up a disproportionate share of service members, and

Veterans¹ who return to rural areas are less likely to have access to DVA's network of medical and social services (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2010). Currently, over two million service members have participated in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) (Department of Defense, 2010), and more than 44% of military recruits come from rural areas (Tyson, 2005). As the GWOT continues, more and more young people will depart rural farming communities, and many will not return. It is clear that the future of our food system depends on the return of young people to the traditional farming landscape and it depends on the passing of traditional farming knowledge from farmer to farmer.

The latest research suggests OIF/OEF (Operation Iraqi Freedom / Operation Enduring Freedom) Veterans face significant challenges, regardless of whether they choose to settle in a rural or urban landscape after their service. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) rates for OIF / OEF era Veterans are as high as 35% when factoring in the delayed onset of the condition (Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences, 2009). Homelessness is another issue confronting recent Veterans. In the United States, Veterans comprise nearly 20% of the homeless population, though only eight percent of the general population claim Veteran status (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2010). Similarly, depression and suicide rates for those who served during OIF / OEF are astronomical. The VA confirmed recently that 1,000 suicide

¹ I have chosen to capitalize the word Veteran throughout this thesis. A Veteran myself, I believe strongly in the need for society to recognize Veterans as a demographic, as a community, and as an often marginalized group. I acknowledge that not every person who is a Veteran asserts this status as a part of their identity. However, a large portion of people are connected by their experiences serving in the armed forces. This connection and the sacrifices of these individuals afford respect. Therefore, understanding that language is fluid, I capitalize Veteran here, and will continue to do so in the future.

attempts by Veterans occur each *month* (Katz, 2008). In fact, Veteran suicide rates are nearly double that of the non-Veteran population (Malbran, 2007).² Many Veterans return home disillusioned, feeling disconnected from family and friends, lacking the tools and skills they need to successfully transition to civilian life. In addition to these challenges, Veterans are entering a difficult job market and a downturned economy. With all of these barriers to successful re-integration to civilian life, it is clear that GWOT Veterans are a growing cohort of underserved and marginalized individuals.

In response to the needs of both the farming and Veteran communities, new organizations such as the Farmer-Veteran Coalition (FVC) have emerged. The FVC is a non-profit organization that believes family farmers can help returning Veterans by providing employment and training opportunities as well as places to “heal.” In addition, the FVC recognizes the opportunity for Veterans to fill a crucial need for “more good hard-working people” in agriculture (Farmer-Veteran Coalition, 2010). The FVC has no affiliation with the Veterans Administration (VA), and takes a decidedly unique and personal approach to fostering collaboration between small farmers and Veterans.

As a Veteran of the GWOT who intends to pursue farming as my livelihood in Northern California, I am intrigued by the opportunities for Veterans and farmers to work together to address their respective needs. I approached this research with a strong desire to influence positively the lives of those in my community – Veterans and farmers alike.

² There is *no* federal agency that tracks Veteran suicide data nationally. CBS News compiled data from each state in 2007, and an independent statistician analyzed the data. For more information, please see http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/11/13/cbsnews_investigates/main3498625.shtml

This research explored the potential benefits and challenges to collaboration between small farmers and Veterans. It utilized the Farmer-Veteran Coalition as a model for potential collaboration. The geographical parameters of the study focused on Northern California, the region in which the FVC primarily operates, and in which most of the research participants reside. I examined the literature pertaining to the current challenges facing Veterans and small farmers. In particular, I combed the literature for examples of how these two groups have worked together in the past, and outlined the need and the timeliness of addressing potential collaboration now. Using the FVC model, I argue that there are challenges to collaboration between these two groups, and that some of these challenges are at times, directly or indirectly addressed by the group as a whole, or by individuals in relationship. I further argue that there are tangible and intangible benefits to such collaboration, both for Veterans and for small farmers. The participants and I conclude by suggesting the need for further research, especially given the increasing popularity of groups like the FVC. We make specific recommendations regarding the FVC model, and more broad recommendations regarding collaboration in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identified Needs in the Farming Community

Over the past few decades, the decline of small farmers in the United States and across the globe has resulted in a dramatic loss of local and traditional farming knowledge. The introduction of industrial farming practices has led to a corporatized food system that makes it difficult for small farming to produce a viable livelihood. Much has been written about this topic, and the phenomenon has been recorded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, 2009) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2010). This loss of small farms and farmers has drastically changed our social and ecological landscapes. Diverse and polycultural family owned / operated farms have been replaced with corporate-owned monocrop agribusinesses. These agribusinesses frequently span thousands of acres, yet remain disconnected from the unique environmental and social qualities of the places and communities where they operate. The corporatization and industrialization of food systems force small farmers out of business, many often fleeing to cities in search of work... and with them goes vital place-specific knowledge of how to best coax food from Earth's ecosystems.

Few young people are eager to perpetuate the small farm in America today. The harsh competition from agribusiness is one major deterrent. The representation of farming as "drudgery" and of farmers as "hicks" by popular media and culture is another

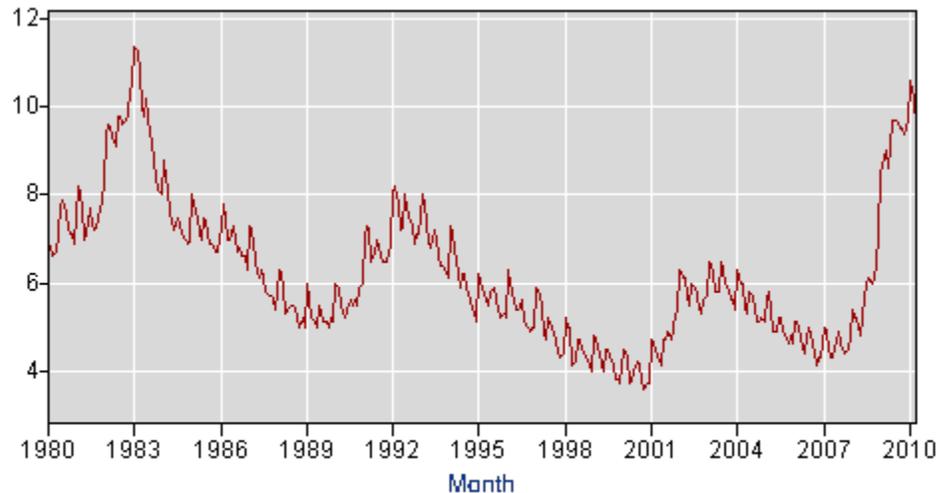
(Berry, 1981: x). More and more people are moving from the country to the city, and lands traditionally used for agriculture are being re-zoned for other uses. Our once potential future farmers are fleeing, and once fertile lands are being paved over. These shifts pose serious risks to the remaining community of small farmers, and to the continued existence of generational, place-based knowledge of sustainable food production.

The negative impacts of losing small farms and local farming knowledge have been widely documented and discussed. I will not recount these findings here. However, critiques of the contemporary globalized food system demonstrate how it weakens food security and sovereignty (Shiva, 2000), undermines biodiversity within ecosystems (Shiva, 1997), threatens the stability of local economies (Schumacher, 1973 and Magdoff et. al., 2000), increases poverty and the gap between rich and poor (Mies and Shiva, 1993), decreases ecosystem and human health (Berry, 2003 and Altieri, 2000), and threatens the social and ecological resiliency in communities and ecosystems across our planet (Shiva, 1991). These problems, combined with unpredictable changes in our living support systems due to climate change, indicate an imperative need to address the loss of small farms from the landscape, the loss of young people from small farms, and hence, the loss of traditional farming knowledge from our collective memory.

Identified Needs in the Veteran Community

The myriad of challenges that a military service member faces upon returning to civilian life are collected under a few commonly used terms: reintegration, readjustment, and transition are the terms often utilized by Veteran service agencies, the media, and Veterans themselves.³ Reintegration of service members can be a lengthy and trying process, for the individual, the family, the community, and the nation. For Veterans of the GWOT, reintegration can be especially difficult. Many GWOT Veterans have experienced multiple combat tours overseas, and all are returning home to a dismal job market and an economy that is suffering its greatest blow since the early 1980s (See table 1. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).⁴

ANNUAL U.S. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE (IN PERCENTAGES) FOR AGES 16+



³ They are used interchangeably here.

⁴ In 2009, the unemployment rate for GWOT Veterans was 10.2 percent. For those ages 18 to 24, the unemployment rate was 21.1 percent. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

Figure 1

Transition for these Veterans entails struggles with meeting the most basic of needs (adequate / stable income, shelter, and food), and is further hampered by war-time experiences that often adversely affect their ability to function in a civilian landscape. Even opportunities unique to a person who has served in the military (e.g. the GI Bill and the VA home loan) are ineffectual when sweeping budget cuts are eliminating university programs and the inability to find and keep a job removes any chances for buying a home. For those Veterans fortunate enough to utilize their GI Bill to attend college, many struggle to adapt to a classroom environment, suffering from symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD in particular, lies at the root of many other significant barriers to a Veteran's successful transition to civilian life. The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD), a component of the Veterans Health Administration, defines PTSD as a

psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of life-threatening events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults like rape.... People who suffer from PTSD often relive the experience through nightmares and flashbacks, have difficulty sleeping, and feel detached or estranged, and these symptoms can be severe enough and last long enough to significantly impair the person's daily life.

PTSD is marked by clear biological changes as well as psychological symptoms. PTSD is complicated by the fact that it frequently occurs in conjunction with related disorders such as depression, substance abuse, problems of memory and cognition, and other problems of physical and mental health. The disorder is also associated with

impairment of the person's ability to function in social or family life, including occupational instability, marital problems and divorces, family discord, and difficulties in parenting (NCPTSD Fact Sheet, unkn.).⁵

PTSD presents serious and sometimes life-long challenges for many Veterans, impeding their mental and physical well-being and their ability to reintegrate into civilian communities. Therefore, it is in the interest of communities as well as the individual, to address PTSD in effectual and long-lasting ways.

The struggle to readjust to civilian life can leave Veterans feeling isolated and alone. Recent books and articles (Cantrell and Dean, 2005, IVAW and Aaron Glantz, 2008, Dao and Frosch, 2010) highlight the transition experiences of those who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, giving voice to these feelings of alienation and the need for transition time, information, and tools upon returning from combat:

Home-the place many think is the safe haven to find relief from the stress of war may initially be a letdown. When a loved one asks, ‘What was it like?’, and you look into eyes that have not seen what yours have, you suddenly realize that home is farther away than you ever imagined (Cantrell & Dean, 2005: 30).

A different approach to transition – one that holistically addresses the barriers of reintegration – is clearly necessary. Such an approach must help to eliminate feelings of alienation and aid in creating fundamental shifts in the way one thinks about themselves and the world they live in (Lyons, 2007). It must improve the ability for a Veteran to

⁵ I would like to acknowledge the recent discussion within the medical profession about the use of the word *disorder* to describe the condition known as PTSD. However, because the DSM-IV (2000) and the VA recognize and utilize the term PTSD, this research will do so also.

transition from military life to civilian life by providing skills, information, and opportunities to overcome a poor job market and perhaps a significant amount of financial burden. It must be successful in providing useful avenues for a Veteran to meet his/her basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) Finally, such a program would foster a caring environment whereby a Veteran could process events of combat and reconcile them with a positive self-identity.

The Role of Nature

E.O. Wilson argues that humans have an innate, evolutionary based desire to connect with the natural world, and that “our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, and hope rises on its currents.” (1984). The fields of nature therapy, eco-therapy, and horticulture therapy are rooted in this basic premise, and countless examples in history demonstrate the connection between nature and human health. In ancient times, royalty who were suffering from mental illness were prescribed regular garden walks. Horticulture therapy techniques were employed at mental institutions during the 18th and 19th centuries, and the American Horticulture Therapy Association recognizes that the modern field of horticulture therapy (which is an established field legitimizing the connection between plants and human health) grew out of the holistic treatment of soldiers in WWII (AHTA, unkn.). Today, interaction with plants and nature is considered a reputable tool to help address the needs of alter-abled individuals, at risk youth, and war Veterans (Shoemaker, 2004).

Similarly, the benefits of exposure to nature specifically through gardening or farming have been established historically and in the literature. Vita Sackville-West wrote,

Small pleasures must correct great tragedies,
Therefore of gardens in the midst of war
I boldly tell. (1946: 13).

Kenneth Helphand's recent book on wartime gardening also highlights the importance of gardening / farming activities for those enveloped in warzone areas (2006). The work of Francis and Hester Jr.(1990), as well as Rachel and Stephen Kaplan (1989) identifies the act of gardening as providing multiple benefits for the gardener, including a sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, and control. In addition, they show that gardening provides feelings of connectedness, time for contemplation, and a basis for socializing. This socialization challenges prejudices and fosters an enriched sense of community. (1990: 246-247). These benefits are significantly parallel to the challenges of transitioning Veterans. Yet, little research has been directed at exploring how gardening / farming activities could specifically address the needs of transitioning GWOT Veterans.

The Need to Examine Farmer-Veteran Collaboration

Absent from the literature is any examination of the growing phenomenon of non-profits and Veteran service organizations incorporating plant cultivation opportunities as integral parts of their transitioning programs for Veterans. Veterans and service members

are seeking out these experiences on their own and it is important to examine why, what are the benefits, what are the challenges, and what does the phenomenon say about trauma and the larger connection between people and non-human nature? Little research has been conducted examining the effects of gardening and farming programs for Veterans of the GWOT. The research conducted that examines challenges for combat Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan highlights a desperate need for transition tools and information, but is all but silent about how these programs might address Veteran needs. These are especially important gaps to address given the use of therapy with plants to treat Veterans of previous wars, and given the emergence of new forums for Veterans to engage with plant cultivation, including non-profits, homes, farms, and gardens. Examples of these forums in the California region include the Farmer-Veteran Coalition, Incopah Wellness & Retreat Center, Veterans Village & the Patrick McCaffrey Foundation, and numerous Veterans gardens across the state. This study is timely, given the more than two million service members who have served or are currently serving in the GWOT, and their demonstrated increased risk of encountering transition barriers when returning to civilian life.

In addition, it is important to explore if or how Veterans returning to the rural farming landscapes of America (in this case, Northern California) influence or address the challenges small farmers face today. This timely examination illuminates potential strategies for mitigating the loss of small farms and traditional farming knowledge in an age when the industrial agribusiness model and climate change shroud the future of food

cultivation in uncertainty. Using the Farmer-Veteran Coalition as a model of collaboration, the research examined these questions: Can collaboration address the needs of both the Veteran and small farmer communities? What are the benefits and the challenges to collaboration? And finally, what suggestions can be offered for the future?

METHODS

Epistemology

The research utilizes two frameworks that are beneficial for situating the research and myself: Advocacy / Participatory epistemology, which focuses on “advocating for an action agenda to help marginalized peoples” (Creswell, 2007: 9), and feminist standpoint epistemology which identifies that “knowledge claims are always socially situated” (Harding, 1993: 54). These theories of knowledge complement one another, specifically with respect to my particular research interests, my background, and the questions that the research addresses. The challenges and needs of both small farmers and Veterans have been thoroughly identified and researched. The work of James Scurfield, Edgar Jones, and others have contributed to large advances in society’s understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other struggles Veterans may face when transitioning to civilian life. Similarly, the research of Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Wendell Berry, and others has illuminated the plight of the small farmer and the rapid loss of traditional farming knowledge across the globe. It is already clear these problems exist, and their consequences are well documented. Therefore, a pragmatic epistemology is not necessary. Rather, a framework is needed to interrogate models of addressing these problems successfully. The advocacy / participatory epistemology provides this framework. Identifying the problems facing these two communities, previous research repeatedly calls for change at the policy level - a main tenant of the advocacy /

participatory epistemological framework. The framework also allows for the idea that the creation of knowledge through advocacy inherently changes the participants and the researcher. One of the main interests I have in conducting this research is to provide information that will ultimately lead to changes in farming and Veteran institutions, with the goal of improving the lives of those in both communities, including my own.

In addition, the research borrows from feminist standpoint epistemology. This epistemological framework allows for the examination of small farmers and Veterans as marginalized groups in society, exploring how the problems these communities face are borne, in part, out of the systems of power, privilege, and oppression that actively marginalize them. For example, small farmers and their intimate knowledge of their place have been labeled as “backward,” “inefficient,” and “old-fashioned.” These labels render invisible small farmers, their knowledge, and their agency. Similarly, Veterans, are often viewed as “crazy,” “lazy,” or “dangerous.” These labels in many ways act as inhibitors to attaining proper medical care or gainful employment, and encourage others to treat Veterans disrespectfully. Lack of proper medical care and a hostile community environment contribute to the problems this community faces. Therefore, to answer the question of whether or not collaboration between small farmers and Veterans successfully addresses the problems identified in both communities, the research must interrogate if the policies, practices, and behaviors of the proposed solutions work to dismantle the systems of power, privilege, and oppression that uphold and reinforce such stereotypes. A feminist framework allows for this interrogation.

Methodology

The research employs participatory action research methodology, as this methodology blends with the epistemological frameworks chosen, and because it allows (as the epistemologies do) a central place for the participants in the research. As Frank Fischer notes, participatory research evolved from “collaborative research... a ‘client-centered’ methodology designed to facilitate social learning” (Fischer, 2005: 176). Participatory research also complements the advocacy / participatory epistemology by emphasizing the development of a plan of action through collective learning. Using this approach, the participants and I use the knowledge generated from this research to suggest necessary shifts in public and institutional policies. Participants engaged with the research as citizen experts, and have begun to develop plans for future action regarding the improvement of both communities. In addition, participatory action research rejects the subject-object formulation of researcher and researched, and instead advocates for a subject-subject relationship whereby the individual researcher’s experiences and views as well as those of the interviewee are taken into account (Fals-Borda, 2001: 30). Clearly, this parallels the above epistemological frameworks as well as the methods the research requires.

This methodology also requires the analysis be conducted with all willing participants, and reported in ways that are easily understood to all who are involved in the

research and the communities to which they belong. In this way too, participatory action methodology benefits small farmer and Veteran communities greatly, developing accessible interpretations of the data that will provide tangible, useful results for them.

Participatory research provides an opportunity to step away from dominant systems of power, privilege, and oppression that can influence research and analysis. Gaventa (1991: 121) states, “participatory research seeks to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched and the subjects and objects of knowledge production through the participation of the people-for-themselves in the attainment and creation of knowledge.” Participatory research involves the transformation of the subject-object relationship into a subject-subject relationship, whereby all parties involved are viewed as researchers in a collaborative process. As a member of the Veteran community with a strong background in farming⁶, this approach appeals to me. I reject the notion that I am an outside researcher, but rather, that I am a member of these communities interested in co-creating knowledge with other community members, in an attempt to alleviate problems and better our lives. Indeed, the outcomes of this research can, and in all likelihood will, have a direct impact on my life. With this in mind, the research was conducted *with* the communities of which I am a part, and data analysis was performed not by combing it for some “objective truth,” but by interpreting it with the

⁶ My family is from rural upstate New York and rural Virginia. As a youth, I was a part of these farming communities, forming a deep connection to nature and to the individuals who coax food from these landscapes. I also tailored my environmental science degree around issues of sustainable food systems. I consider myself to be a proud future farmer of Humboldt County, and am honored to know some of the local farms and farmers who nourish me, my family, and my neighbors.

Veteran and farmer communities, assigning meaning to the research results specifically *as* Veterans and small farmers. This approach also validated some of the forms of knowing and knowledge production within the small farming and Veteran communities (i.e., intuition, story-telling, and “people’s science”). These forms of knowing are not validated or easily calculated in traditional “hard” science inquiry or pure quantitative analysis. Failing to employ participatory research methods would have therefore, produced less satisfactory results.

Methods

The research utilized triangulation research methods including semi-structured, qualitative interviews, direct observation, and some document analysis. Group analysis of the data was also conducted. Utilizing qualitative methods fostered the incorporation of ambiguous or nuanced data such as in-depth descriptions of intuition or feeling, explanations of motivations, and slight changes in moods or behavior. Exploring the research questions in this way was important in determining the effectiveness of collaboration and in examining the met and unmet needs of Veterans and small farmers. I relied on my current familiarity with both the Veteran and farming communities to help me identify interviewees, and then utilized snowball sampling techniques to garner further interviewees. Fifteen interviews were conducted, including interviews with:

- 7 Veterans
 - 7 Farmers
 - 2 Couples (4 individuals in all)
 - 1 VA mental health professional
 - 3 FVC employees or recent employees
 - 2 Veteran – Farmers
- *some individuals fit into multiple categories

Group involvement in the design of the research was limited for a number of reasons. First, interviewees had differing levels of investment in the results of the research. Consequently, it was difficult to create a sense of group ownership over logistics such as interview questions and selection of interviewees. Second, as noted in some of the interview comments, the Farmer-Veteran Coalition is a young non-profit that is still crafting its own identity and internal organization. As such, the research was useful as a tool to help participants consider questions of group identity, while not demanding activities that required group decision making. Third, some Veterans were uncomfortable around new faces, and/or in enclosed spaces and as the research reveals, some Veterans were struggling with meeting basic needs and therefore less inclined to participate in group meetings addressing research design. Finally, as one interviewee put it, getting farmers together “is like herding cats.” With a busy growing season demanding their attention, and long commutes for some, it was unrealistic to bring representatives from the Veteran and small farming communities together regularly throughout the research. For these reasons, I did not garner group input on the design of the interview questions. However, I designed research questions that addressed a few basic themes I believed were important to this exploration, but used them mainly as a

guide when necessary. Interviews were conducted as more of a conversation, the direction of which was primarily determined by the interviewee.

To interpret the data, interviewees were invited to a group analysis meeting once all data was collected and coded to protect confidentiality. The group that met was small (five participants), but it brought new perspectives to the analysis, and there was a desire among those who participated (and some who could not make it) to continue discussions, especially with regard to improving the Farmer-Veteran Coalition model of collaboration. Plans are underway to continue this work together in the future. The participatory model provided a genuine opportunity for Veterans and small farmers alike to experience feelings of empowerment, hope, and support.

FINDINGS

Overall, it is clear that the FVC model of collaboration that emphasizes individual attention and community formation provides unique benefits to both Veteran and small farmer. It is also clear that significant challenges affect the efficacy of collaborative efforts. Table 1 outlines the challenges most often cited by participants. Some Veterans are unable to participate in collaboration fully because they are hampered by unmet basic needs such as adequate shelter and financial security. At times, physical and/or mental health barriers also present challenges to collaboration. The fear of poor “matches” between farmers and Veterans was another frequently mentioned challenge. In addition, it is clear that perceptions of the “other” and stereotypes of Veterans and of farmers play a significant role in collaboration, sometimes challenging collaboration and sometimes fostering it.

Table 1: Challenges to Collaboration Identified by Interviewees

Challenge Identified	Percentage of Interviewees
Inadequate / unstable housing	27%
Financial hardship / poor job market	53%
Physical / mental health barriers	47%
Fears of collaboration “mis-match”	33%
Stereotypes (of Self or Other)	60%

Though challenges are present, the research findings suggest that collaboration that emphasizes individual attention can offer Veterans and small farmers unique opportunities to address needs and better their communities. Interaction between Veterans and farmers participating in the FVC model may also disrupt perceptions and stereotypes, providing a benefit for participants and society as a whole. Other benefits include fostering feelings of caring and connection to others, as well as feelings of doing “meaningful work.” Participants also identified boosting self-esteem and feelings of hope as benefits of interaction (See Table 2). It is also possible that feelings of peace or healing are benefits of collaboration, though in most cases, comments referring to “healing” or “peace” were made in a general context and were not specifically used to describe an individual’s personal experience.

Table 2: Benefits to Collaboration Identified by Interviewees

Benefit Identified	Percentage of Interviewees
Challenging ideas / stereotypes of the other	33%
Feeling cared for / part of a community	80%
Feelings of performing meaningful work	60%
Feelings of Self-esteem / Self-confidence	47%
Feelings of Hope (for the future)	27%

Further benefits included fostering interest in farming for a new generation of young people, and actually bringing young people into the farming community. While it will take more research to clearly establish if collaboration efforts bring young people back to the farming landscape on a long term, larger scale, this research suggests that such a claim is a definite possibility and that the challenges to collaboration can be overcome to achieve the benefits.

Challenges of Collaboration

Many Veterans seeking opportunities for collaboration with small farmers are simultaneously challenged to meet more basic needs such as stable housing, financial security, and adequate physical and mental health care. It is clear that a model for collaboration must be able to identify these unmet needs if present, and provide tools or referrals to address these needs either before or in conjunction with support for collaboration with the farming community. Both Veterans and small farmers reference this challenge to collaboration as significant. For some, stable housing is an immediate need. One Veteran described a period of time after serving in the Army when he felt he was constantly “one relationship away from homelessness.” Another Veteran described living in his car periodically since completing his military service. He explained that it was difficult to take advantage of mentorship opportunities when “you are trying to figure out where you’re going to live and how you’re going to get the money to eat.” Yet another Veteran lived in a tent for a brief period while waiting to be placed on a farm through the Farmer-Veteran Coalition. These comments were common among Veteran

interviewees. While collaboration organizations like the FVC could simply refer Veterans to transitional housing facilities, they are instead creating individualized opportunities for Veterans to find housing opportunities *on farms* and *with* mentors who can provide them with more than a roof over their heads. The Farmer-Veteran Coalition staff report that farming opportunities which also offer a form of housing are popular among Veterans who have contacted them. These situations are indeed unique, and while they may not be appropriate for every Veteran, it is a new model for transition – something that is clearly needed and appreciated by Veterans who have participated.

However, this development also presents a challenge. Many positions for Veterans on farms are temporary, coinciding with the growing season rather than being permanent or long-term opportunities. The opportunity for housing may disappear with the job once the farmer's need for an employee no longer exists. This presents a definite challenge for collaboration, as collaboration should ultimately provide both Veteran and small farmer with a valuable experience that allows them to move closer to their respective goals. Disruptive interludes undermine this opportunity, preventing them from making meaningful progress.

Financial security is another basic need for Veterans that can pose a challenge to collaboration. Fifty-three percent of interviewees mentioned financial barriers specifically as challenging to collaboration. One Veteran-farmer put it this way:

Finances are a 'sleeper' issue for many Vets – military members are targeted by credit card companies, often luring them into huge debts

by the time they get out of the service. Soldiers need financial management but most do not have this background when they get out (of the military). Most are used to having basic needs met even if they are broke; they can still eat at the chow hall and sleep in the barracks. The bottom line for Veterans who want to farm – it is *very* difficult to go into farming if you are already in debt. Farming has been one giant home economics class for me.

Many Veterans receive little to no guidance on proper money management and are in debt, sometimes significantly, when they get out of the military. Helping Veterans address financial issues seems to be a top priority both to the Veteran and to the success of collaboration. Obtaining financial stability is an important first step on a Veteran's journey to achieving their goals. To date, the Farmer-Veteran Coalition has not addressed this issue directly, but collaboration with the FVC has provided some Veterans with free training and mentorship with farmers who give financial advice and sometimes monetary assistance. The FVC is also working to grow a scholarship fund that helps new Veteran-farmers with start up costs.

Financial hardship for Veterans is also a factor when considering the dismal job market and downturned U.S. economy. Out of seven farmers who were interviewed, three noted that most of the work on their farms was conducted by family members or themselves, and that providing an outside employee (Veteran or not) with a living wage and compensation benefits was a key concern and significant hurdle. Some farmers who would otherwise be interested in mentoring a Veteran are unable to participate in collaboration if collaboration is contingent upon paying the Veteran a living wage. Some are willing to trade work for living space or crop vegetables, but many simply do not

have the ability to pay outside workers. This predicament is a reflection of both the low return a small farmer receives for the crops s/he grows, and of the poor state of the economy in general. Simply put, a Veteran cannot apply for a farming job that does not exist, and therefore has fewer options for meeting the need of financial stability through collaboration with the farming community.

Nearly 47% of interviewees also cited physical and mental health barriers as possible challenges to collaboration between Veterans and small farmers. What is clearly important in addressing these challenges is the flexibility of both Veteran and farmer to finding solutions that will allow them to continue collaborating. One farmer described the importance of flexibility, noting that:

The challenges Vets face on the farm may be unique, but all farmers must work with the idiosyncrasies of their workers, because all workers, regardless of background or military experience, have them. The qualities I really look for when hiring may not be what you would think of first...I look for honesty, timeliness. If a person has these qualities, you can work with their eccentricities or limitations.

Another farmer described the questions that go through his mind when he hires a new employee: "Will he do a good job? Will he be reliable?" These concerns exist for the farmer regardless of whether or not he/she is hiring a Veteran (although some farmers mentioned that these concerns are lessened because of their perceptions about Veterans in general. This phenomenon is discussed in more detail later). The farmer then goes on to describe how he currently has a Veteran working for him that has had difficult transition

needs, but made him feel comfortable enough to take a family vacation during a precarious time in the growing season:

In the past year, I helped him (the Veteran) get his license back and obtain a vehicle, and he also lives with me on the farm. I've helped him on his journey, and he has helped me by working on the farm...In fact, (because the Veteran was doing such a good job) my family was able to go on vacation – during a frost alert time of the year!

It is important to note that many small farmers made reference to the idea that flexibility is necessary with any new hire, not just Veterans. This is important because it highlights this challenge is not unique to Veterans. These farmers seem to recognize the need to assess any employee's strengths and weaknesses and work with the employee to find successful ways of working together. This one-on-one approach is particularly helpful for Veterans it seems, as it provides some of those more intangible positive outcomes (feelings of self-worth, hope, and confidence).

While the flexibility approach can address many of the physical and mental health challenges of collaboration, it is inevitable that at some point, there will be an individual “match” between a Veteran and a small farmer that simply does not work out. Perhaps goals changed for one or both parties, or perhaps a Veteran's abilities changed over the course of collaboration. Whatever the case may be, there is worry among those facilitating collaboration that such a mis-match will do irreparable harm to one or both parties, and possibly to the reputation of the organization. One employee of the FVC puts it this way:

Our reputation is built on the quality of the jobs Veterans find through our organization and the quality of work they provide on farms... How do we screen the job offers to make sure no one is being taken advantage of? And how will it affect us if a Veteran or a farmer has to rescind on his or her commitments?

It is a fear that also resonates with some participants. “Farming can be stressful. It’s not for everyone and not for every Vet.... It (farming) is not for the meek, you have to be ready to soul search.” This sentiment was echoed by another participant who observed that, “If farmers are unwilling to work literally side by side with the Veteran, this can be a definite barrier. There are lots of different ‘farming’ situations – you have to ask how much opportunity does the Vet have to interact with the owner?”

Compounding the above challenges to collaboration is the influence perceptions of the “other” have in interactions between Veterans and small farmers. These perceptions could be labeled as “positive” or “negative” stereotypes. The intention of this research is not to probe how “true” or “false” these perceptions actually are, but to point out that these perceptions, whether seen socially as “positive” or “negative,” can and do influence collaboration in significant ways. Nearly all of the interviewees specifically made reference to memories or occurrences that involved the role of preconceived ideas about the “other” in collaboration. It is clear through the abundant comments made in interviews that perceptions of the “other” (e.g., Veteran perceptions of small farmers and small farmer perceptions of Veterans) play an enormous role in collaboration, whether explicitly recognized or not. Part of the success of collaboration should be measured by the ability for individuals and society to identify, challenge, and

(possibly) dismantle these perceptions, particularly when they lead to harmful consequences.

Farmers' perceptions of Veterans included the following: Veterans have a similar (strong) work ethic to farmers, they are smart, and they know what they want. Veterans were also perceived as being physically strong, young, and in need of less instruction than their civilian counterparts. These perceptions could be labeled as "positive" perceptions of the character of a Veteran. Conversely, and sometimes held within the same person, are what could be classified as "negative" perceptions of Veteran character, including notions that Veterans are mentally unstable, intellectually inferior to their civilian counterparts, or in need of extra instruction. Many non-Veterans also made comments that reveal the perception that Veterans are "struggling" or in need of "healing."

It seems that Veteran perceptions of small farmers also influence collaboration between the two groups. Veterans who were interviewed often made references to similarities between the work ethic of Veterans and that of small farmers. Farmers were also viewed by some to be "close to the land" or to nature, and to excel at being "their own boss." The work of small farmers was viewed as a generous contribution to the community, and hence farmers were seen as people who care about others. These perceptions could be viewed as "positive" attributes of the character of small farmers. However, many Veterans also mentioned the perception of the "backward" and "poor" farmer as prevalent in their fears of pursuing farming as a career and prevalent in the concerns and fears of their family members. These could be considered "negative"

stereotypes. Therefore, not only are the individual perceptions of farmers influencing collaboration, but social perceptions of farming and farmers also play a role in collaboration. It is important to recognize this instrumental influence and examine the ways in which it challenges (or facilitates) collaboration.

Linked closely with perceptions of farmers are the stereotypes of the career or lifestyle of farming in general. Some interviewees expressed a view of farming as a constant struggle, where it is difficult or impossible to make a living, and living conditions are poor. Conversely, there is a particular idealized conception of farming that is prevalent in collaboration where farming is viewed as a “healing” endeavor, particularly for Veterans (though not exclusively so), and that while the work is “hard work” it is seen as “meaningful” or “fun.” In addition, growing food for the community is categorized as a way to help others, and as an act of creation (instead of destruction). A few Veterans also expressed an interest in farming because it would provide them with an opportunity to “be in nature” and be removed from society or on their own. While these particular stereotypes could be viewed as “positive,” it is not difficult to imagine how these stereotypes could lead to negative consequences, as not all farming experiences can be categorized in these ways. These stereotypes are clearly present challenges to successful collaboration outcomes.

Crucial to our understanding of perceptions in the role of collaboration is the need to realize that whether the stereotype could be labeled “positive” or “negative,” any preconceived notions about a group of people labeled as “other” can have potentially

harmful consequences for individuals and for society as a whole. Any organization that is facilitating collaboration must recognize and seek to dismantle these misconceptions. To do this, the organization must be able to recognize when the organization is itself promoting such stereotypes (i.e., presenting all Veterans as having a stellar work ethic or all farmers as caring mentors who have a special relationship with the land.). This can be a significant hurdle to overcome. Similarly, another challenge to collaboration is the colossal task of dispelling particularly “negative” myths about small farmers and Veterans respectively, as media coverage and popular culture reinforce these myths on an almost constant basis.

Benefits of Collaboration

It is clear that the FVC model of collaboration fosters individualized interactions between Veterans and small farmers that help to dispel the preconceived ideas members of each group may have of members of the “other” group. For example, one interviewee stated,

In the beginning, I was scared of Vets. I didn't know if they would go off. But then I met _____, and he just seemed like one of my kids. He could tell I was nervous, and he brought it up (in conversation)... that he can sense that often people are scared of interacting with (him) Veterans – we talked about it honestly and worked through it.

This participant later mentioned that through her participation in the FVC, she has been able to interact with more and more Veterans, which in turn, helped her identify and change views of Veterans that have affected her thoughts and behavior. Over one-third

of interviewees identified collaboration as an indirect tool for addressing the negative stereotypes of Veterans:

People have misconceptions about Vets – that they aren't educated, that they are somehow different from the rest of the population – that they need help understanding concepts. This attitude is not unusual. I was on the phone (with an agricultural company) and they had positions available ranging from CEO to mascot, but they didn't want to post their jobs with us... collaboration can help change these misconceptions.

One Veteran stated that the best part of collaboration is “knowing the farmers are willing to take a risk to hire a Vet – because they are overcoming their fears of the ‘crazy’ Vet and the idea that they as employers will have to deal with the Veteran’s ‘issues.’”

Small farmer stereotypes are also challenged in the FVC model of collaboration.

Personal interaction with small farmers has provided Veterans with experiences that directly defy these stereotypes:

I grew up in a farming family... During the farm crisis in the 1990s, I watched many in my family go bankrupt. I swore off farming... One of the benefits of the FVC is that it offers unlimited access to meeting people who are farming successfully. This opened a world of opportunities for me, and I believe I am a better farmer because of my experiences with them.

Four more participants made similar comments, including the following,

The traditional U.S. farmer image is not attractive to us – and the stereotype certainly isn't flattering – there is no money in farming this way, it is harmful to the environment and to the community. It is not how we want to live. But seeing and learning about alternative means of food production and the farmers who participate in that structure (through the FVC) – *that* is attractive to us... *that* is progressive and exciting.

Another participant expressed the same sentiment in this way:

My perception of farming was that in order to make money, you had to be the owner, have lots of money to begin with, and hire immigrants... that farming is difficult or impossible otherwise. Since working with the FVC, I've had exposure to lots of different models of farming, techniques, strategies, and segments of the food industry. I see many opportunities for regular people to earn a decent living and enjoy their work.

Interrogating individual perceptions or stereotypes of the “other” is not one of the stated goals of the FVC. Nonetheless, it is clear that the FVC model of collaboration allows Veterans and farmers to interact and get to know one another on an individual basis, and that this interaction may shine a light on such stereotypes, revealing and at times dismantling their power over thoughts and actions.

Parallel to the benefit of challenging stereotypes, individuals in collaboration made strikingly similar remarks regarding how collaboration fostered feelings of community, self-esteem, and hope. Frequently, participants made comments emphasizing how collaboration positively influenced their thoughts on the future. These comments contribute to a larger picture of successful transition for Veterans, and of an improved outlook for the small farming community and the U.S. food system.

For Veterans, feelings of alienation are common while transitioning to civilian life. One interviewee put it best, “Everybody wants to be connected in some way... we are social creatures. We long for connection even if we've lost our ability to connect or feel connected.” Some of the comments regarding how Veterans felt collaborating with the FVC or with small farmers in particular reveal how important it is for Veterans to feel like someone cares about them and that they are connected to a supportive community.

When asked to describe (in three words or less) how his experiences with the FVC made him feel, one Veteran replied, “like someone cares.” This sentiment was echoed many times in interviews. In fact, all of the Veteran participants and all but three of the non-Veteran participants made similar comments. One Veteran stated, “I was disgusted with humans for a while, after Iraq... interacting with farmers through the FVC has helped foster that connection to people again.” A spouse of a Veteran spoke of “camaraderie... everyone is in the same boat. At home, people aren’t as supportive, they don’t understand. (Through FVC) we can all relate through experience.” Indeed, some Veterans and farmers alike put supreme importance on this component of collaboration:

The best part of FVC is that they bring Vets together – because they are hiding out – this is an accomplishment in itself. Sharing ideas, addressing problems communally, these things are not possible unless Veterans come together.

Another Veteran answered the question, “What is the most important part of collaboration?” with, “Community. Americans have really lost this since the (GWOT) conflict began – everyone is so polarized... but we can all break bread together, talk in the fields, and find common ground in these things.” Similarly, one interviewee claimed that the most important aspect of the FVC’s work is

knowing that there is someone else out there that gives a rat’s ass – other than the VA. Here’s a civilian that cares about what’s happening to Vets. I just figured no one gave a shit. It’s reassuring – there’s a few decent human beings left in the world.

It is also important to note that some small farmers and some Veterans who are currently farming explicitly made associations between farming and being a part of a community. One farmer put it this way: “Everything I do is a communication with the community I serve.” Another farmer describes his experience, “Making something, creating something... providing for others. This provides a genuine connection with people in the community. People begin to feel like they are wanted and appreciated (customers and farmers)... I get thank yous from people all the time.” The idea of connection was interpreted also in a more literal sense of connection to “real” things, or to a world that is understandable. One Veteran spoke of the simplicity of interacting with plants, “plants are more predictable – they live or they die – things make sense. If the plant dies, it’s okay, and things make sense.” Another participant described how he feels when he is farming or gardening: “it’s good. It encourages a connection with the present and what’s real...” These are just a few of the many similar comments that reflect how Veterans and small farmers alike view their collaboration and the act of farming itself as ways of fostering feelings of fellowship and connection with one another. The significance that participants gave to these responses as well as to this topic when conducting group analysis speak to the heavy weight of importance it is given by collaborators. This significance is revealing when considering the plethora of articles that have exposed how inadequate military transition programs are at fostering these same feelings.

Another benefit identified frequently by participants was feeling like they were engaged in “meaningful” work. The importance of these feelings cannot be understated.⁷ Nine interviewees described feeling a sense of purpose that provided satisfaction and happiness, “It gives me a feeling of purpose. I’m doing something worthwhile.” Another interviewee put it this way, “It feels good when I’m out *doing* something and seeing the results...this is satisfying. Specifically, I want to feel like what I’m doing means something.” Wendell Berry has written much on the importance of meaningful work, and the ways in which it improves our economies, our political endeavors, and our daily lives. In *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), I believe he comes to a conclusion that succinctly describes how meaningful work influences the lives of these participants,

“They have willingly given up considerable amounts of convenience, and considerable amounts of control too, and have made their lives more risky and difficult than before. Why? For satisfaction, I think. And where does this satisfaction come from? I think it comes from contact with the materials and lives of this world, from the mutual dependence of creatures upon one another, from fellow feeling.” (p.180-181).

One Veteran’s spouse observed, “He’s most happy when he is working with his hands, building, doing a hard day’s work. He is most happy in the natural environment. These things give him self confidence.” Notably, some participants made connections between military duties and farming. The stereotypes of “hard-working” and working to “serve others” reveal themselves in these comments. While this is referred to in earlier sections,

⁷ For excellent examinations of the importance of “meaningful” work, see the lifelong works of Wendell Berry, including *What Are People For* (1990), *Another Turn of the Crank* (1995), *Citizenship Papers* (2003), and *the Unsettling of America* (1977).

I believe it is important to reiterate how these stereotypes influence collaborator feelings about farm work and the “other.”

Closely related to the concept of “meaningful” work, self-confidence and self-esteem were also identified by participants as benefits to collaboration. One Veteran-farmer remarked,

When I was overseas, at least at some point there was a sense that I was doing something meaningful... then to come home and work in some shit job... well, farming restores that feeling of self-worth. It's soothing.

Another Veteran spoke of his first year of farming: “I developed a thick skin. I learned I could do this (farming) even under pressure, even under extreme conditions.” This sentiment was repeated by over 50% of Veterans and farmers describing Veterans they work with. Similarly, some participants also described how seeing other Veterans who have successfully made the transition to farming made them “feel like they could do it too” and that they could be triumphant in “pursuing a dream.” One couple put it this way, “It's empowering and encouraging to be around other like-minded Vets and farmers.” Comments about the satisfaction of meaningful work and the boost in self esteem and confidence from collaboration were often made in conjunction with expressions of hope for the future.

Whether stated explicitly or implicitly, the theme of hope resounded in the responses of most of the participants. Indeed, nearly half of the Veteran participants specifically identified FVC founder Michael O’Gorman as a caring person who has given

them hope: “People like Michael O’Gorman and the FVC will get things done and this directly offers hope that not everyone is apathetic.” Another Veteran talked about how interacting with the Farmer-Veteran Coalition was unique in making him feel hopeful,

I stopped looking for other organizations after I talked to Michael because he is sincere about helping others. I could tell they (the FVC) cared about my future, and saw that the group has as much passion for their dreams as I do for mine, so I began to believe that my dream is possible – that it isn’t crazy.

Similar comments were made regarding collaborating with other FVC participants as well. People described feeling hopeful in particular, when they could “see other people who have succeeded” and when they could interact “with other Vets who have done, are doing, or want to also do” what they are pursuing. One mental health professional who serves the Veteran population remarked, “Mental health is tied to physical health. We need to provide people (Veterans) with hope... putting a seed in the ground acts as a statement of hope – the hope that it will grow, the hope that comes with the fundamental ability to feed oneself.” Curiously, while the sentiment of hope resonated throughout the interviews, the word “hope” was not often used to specifically describe the physical acts of planting or farming. However, it is clear that for both farmers and Veterans who have engaged in farming or are seeking farming experiences (in this study), the acts of farming are linked with the above mentioned feelings of connection, community, meaningful work, self-confidence, and self-esteem, which *are* described as hopeful feelings, especially in the context of interacting with other caring persons through collaboration.

The notion of collaboration and / or farming activities as “healing” or “peaceful” was also an intriguing point of interest in this research. More than 53% of participants used the terms “healing” or “peaceful” when referring to collaboration and to farming activities in particular. However, the statements that were made in this vein typically were general statements about Veterans as a group (though sometimes farmers as a group), and not first person statements indicating personal feelings of healing or peacefulness. Examples include, “peace of mind can come with a stable job that they can do and like doing (speaking about Veterans),” and “just having a meaningful job is healing.” When asked, “What is the most important part of Veterans and small farmers collaborating together?” one participant replied, “healing is the important part... healed into talking and becoming a whole member of society again (referring to Veterans).” Some indirect comments were made suggesting perhaps a participant had feelings of peacefulness or healing, but other words were used to describe this. One Veteran claimed, “Farming is calming for my PTSD symptoms.” Others talked about how being in nature (in a farming setting) felt good because it was away from crowds / people, or made references to “being able to think” in such surroundings.

Again, it is important to note that for the most part, individuals did not refer to themselves as in a process of “healing.” However, this concept is pervasive as an idea of a benefit to collaboration between these two groups. In particular, the perception that Veterans find ways to “heal” or find “peace” while engaged in farming activities and in collaborating with others is found within the mission statement of the FVC, and the idea

clearly influences the perceptions FVC participants have of Veterans. One revealing remark was made by a participant regarding these assumptions, “I’ve learned so much myself about how insensitive people can be... to say, ‘oh, that must be so healing’ to a Vet is like saying, ‘you must be so broken.’” This is not to say that healing does not occur, or that Veterans and small farmers alike do not derive comfort and peace from their endeavors. It does suggest, however, that great care be taken when describing the benefits that such collaboration purports.

Collaboration also offers the small farming community opportunities to generate interest in farming among a new generation of young people who are eager to learn, as well as opportunities to mentor the next generation of farmers, sharing vital and irreplaceable place-based knowledge necessary to growing food and crafting a livelihood from the land. While this study focused on a relatively small subset of the farming and Veteran populations over a short time period, it is clear that the FVC model is indeed generating genuine interest in small farming as a lifestyle and profession. This is one of their successes. In addition, it is important to recognize that the FVC model has had a multiplying effect, increasing opportunities for small farmers and Veterans as more and more Veterans enter the farming profession. Many of the Veterans who have become farmers with the help of the FVC have gone on to hire other Veterans, or are interested in setting up programs specifically catering to Veterans who are interested in farming. This model of collaboration therefore, has a self-replicating component that continues to foster hope and connection, while also ensuring a new generation of farmers for the nation.

Group Analysis

Examining the data collected as a group, participants offered suggestions specifically for improving the Farmer-Veteran Coalition model of collaboration. The chief concern of the group was that the FVC maintain their individualized style of providing services, as this approach was viewed as the catalyst for providing Veterans and small farmers with the benefits discussed above. Keeping individual attention as the main focus, the group suggested addressing barriers to collaboration by: clearly defining roles and responsibilities for all collaborators, expanding knowledge of outside farmer and Veteran service agencies and resources, and conducting regular organizational assessments, seeking ways to improve collaboration while continuing to foster community.

The group suggested that the FVC invest time in developing clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all involved in collaboration (employees, small farmers, and Veterans) and that these roles and responsibilities be clearly outlined and discussed as each “match” between farmer and Veteran is made. In this way, participants decrease chances for miscommunication and improve the FVC’s ability to find the best “match” between small farmer and Veteran. In addition, the group hypothesized that developing a “trial period” program would foster positive collaboration and reduce fears of a collaboration “mis-match.” Such a program would allow farmers and Veterans to meet one another and try out different farming situations for a shorter period of time before committing to long-term agreement. The FVC could work with Veteran and farmer to

develop goals for the “trial period” program, and provide short-term funding (used as wage compensation for the Veteran) as an incentive to participate.

Examining the broad range of challenges to collaboration, the analysis group recommended that the FVC become knowledgeable about the general challenges of both the Veteran and small farming communities, and invest in forming good working relationships with the community service agencies and organizations that deal with challenges that lie outside of purview of collaboration. The group believed it is important for the FVC to include in its mission a responsibility to identify community resources and make referrals to community agencies when appropriate. By doing so, the FVC would serve as a useful relationship for Veterans and small farmers, regardless of where they are on their journey, or what specific needs they have.

Furthermore, group participants suggested that the FVC continue to engage in research pertaining to the challenges and benefits of collaboration in general, and of their particular collaboration model specifically, employing a participatory analysis approach when possible. As an example, the group recommended that FVC participants meet as a group to examine the role stereotypes of both Veterans and small farmers play in collaboration. FVC participants could examine the organization’s mission statement and promotional materials as a first step in recognizing the role of perceptions of the “other” in collaboration. The analysis group believed this exercise would be crucial, as the research indicates that perceptions and stereotypes very influential, though they may not be explicitly discussed.

Overall, I believe the group analysis was useful in generating suggestions for improving the FVC model of collaboration. While in theory, participatory research would involve participants from the inception of the research idea, in practice group involvement was practical only for data interpretation and analysis (for reasons mentioned previously). However, the group analysis provided excellent and diverse ideas regarding the improvement of the FVC model of collaboration. I believe this group analysis component of the research greatly improved the quality of the analysis and its usefulness to the small farming and Veteran communities.

CONCLUSION

Using the FVC as a model, this research provides an important and timely examination of the benefits and challenges to collaboration between Veterans and small farmers. The findings provide guidance for improving the FVC model in particular, as well as collaboration efforts generally. The findings also identify areas of interest that remain unexplored and highlight the importance of larger and longer term studies. These future studies could be instrumental in promoting positive change at the policy level, which is repeatedly called for in the literature. Overall, this research demonstrates how collaboration between Veterans and small farmers can be an important transitioning tool for Veterans, and an opportunity for small farmers to expand their community and impart traditional farming knowledge to a new generation of farmers. While it is clear that obstacles to successful collaboration exist, these obstacles are not necessarily inherent in the model. The research suggests options for addressing these barriers, while maintaining the personalized structure of collaboration necessary to achieve the benefits identified by interviewees.

Suggestions for Improvement – Farmer-Veteran Coalition

The Farmer-Veteran Coalition is unique in their approach to facilitating collaboration between small farmers and Veterans. It is clear that many of the strengths of their model of facilitation are derived from this uniqueness. In particular, preserving

and building upon the ability to evoke the feeling that “someone cares,” should be one of the main goals of the FVC. To do this, the organization must continue to emphasize personal attention and face to face interaction. In doing so, the FVC will continue to set itself apart from the less personal bureaucratic systems Veterans and small farmers are familiar with. Similarly, the FVC has created a genuine sense of community among participants and is viewed as a special and hopeful organization by nearly all of the collaborators. For these reasons, the FVC should examine further the roots of such created community, the role(s) they play in its formation, and consciously act to build on this knowledge. By doing so, the research suggests that the FVC would further its success in facilitating collaboration.

Without losing their focus on personal attention, the FVC can make adjustments in their programs that would aid collaborators in overcoming the challenges identified in this research. First, building and nurturing working relationships with other Veteran and small farmer service providers would foster a referral process for those participants who are interested in collaboration, but are hampered by circumstances outside the mission of the FVC. Fostering a good working rapport with local organizations that are also devoted to meeting Veteran or small farmer needs will ensure the FVC’s ability to help each of their participants, regardless of where they are on their journey to becoming a collaborator. Second, this research highlighted the significant role of stereotypes in collaboration. The FVC would benefit from an intentional and focused examination on this topic, developing useful strategies to guide decision-making and collaboration

facilitation. Third, the FVC model would benefit from the incorporation of a “test” or “trial” period, whereby small farmers and Veterans begin to establish a working relationship and try out new roles as farmer or mentor. This period should provide compensation to the Veteran, and be sufficient in length to provide tangible benefit to the farmer. Such a program could be partially funded through the FVC, and would address some of the financial barriers to collaboration success. It would also provide an opportunity to avoid collaboration “mis-matches,” thereby helping to alleviate fears mentioned by interviewees. Fourth, as a young organization, the FVC should dedicate time and resources to internal organizational development. Through efforts to clearly define roles, assign responsibilities, and prioritize goals, the FVC would better serve participants and improve the overall perception of the organization. Finally, and more generally, this research is calling for expanded examinations of collaboration between Veterans and small farmers. The FVC could participate in this examination by developing a program that tracks the progress and difficulties of collaborators over the entire length of collaboration, and after. Such an endeavor would provide information used to contribute to the strengthening of the FVC model and collaboration efforts more broadly.

Suggestions for Improving Collaboration In General

The findings of this research suggest that collaboration between Veterans and small farmers can produce benefits for both groups, and address pressing needs in both communities. These benefits hinge on a model of collaboration that places emphasis on

personal attention and individual needs. Those interested in replicating such benefits must emulate a model of collaboration that is couched in a desire to create a sense of community and caring among participants. In the case of the FVC, the model's emphasis on personal attention and interaction allowed collaborators to often indirectly address the influence of stereotypes on collaboration. However, from a feminist approach, the findings point to a need for collaboration models to also develop approaches to specifically and intentionally address stereotypes and the power they have over collaboration efforts.

In addition, it is clear that a main component to collaboration success rests in the ability to recognize when individual basic needs are not being met, and finding appropriate solutions for individual situations, including establishing financial security and stable housing for participants. To do this, collaboration organizations can look to other organizations in the community dedicated to addressing the needs of the Veteran and small farming communities respectively. However, while it is important for collaboration models to gain recognition from and maintain good working relationships with the VA and other larger bureaucratic institutions designed to help Veterans and farmers, it is imperative for collaborators (particularly Veterans) to identify collaboration as specifically outside of these larger institutions. Emphasis should be placed on the unique qualities of collaboration that distinguish it from other programs for Veterans and small farmers.

Suggestions for Future Research

To assess the long-term impact of new kinds of collaborative programs such as the FVC, more research is needed. Given the historical legacy of the challenges facing small farmers and the U.S. food system, as well as the challenges currently facing the Veteran community, one can conclude that larger studies covering longer durations of time (years or decades) would provide a better assessment of the success or failure of collaboration models between small farmers and Veterans. Further research should also include comparison studies among collaborative models, as well as explorations of collaborative models as they compare to more traditional VA and farmer programs. In addition, it is important to continue to investigate what draws Veterans to farming experiences, and the influence stereotypes have over the desires and fears of Veterans and small farmers in collaboration. Such explorations could offer direction for change at a policy level, bettering the lives Veterans and small farmers and the communities to which they belong.

Ultimately, answering the question of whether or not the needs of Veterans and small farmers are adequately met through collaboration is difficult to answer without long-term study. Questions still remaining include: does collaboration influence the *kind* of farming done in the United States; does it foster the long-term preservation of traditional farming knowledge; does it assist in the elimination of barriers like PTSD, and foster long-term financial and employment success for Veterans? Answering these

questions will be instrumental in assessing the usefulness of collaboration between Veterans and small farmers, and ultimately will inform the development of successful solutions for meeting the needs of the nation's two million transitioning Veterans and the small farming community that embraces the traditional knowledge the nation depends on for a reliable and resilient food system.

REFERENCES

- Altieri, 2000. "Ecological Impacts of Industrial Agriculture and the Possibilities for Truly Sustainable Farming," In Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel (eds.) *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*. pp. 77-90. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- American Horticulture Therapy Association (AHTA). Date Unknown. "History and Practice of Horticulture Therapy" Available Online <http://www.ahta.org/information/faq.cfm>. Accessed November 1, 2008.
- American Psychiatric Association. 2000. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Berry, Wendell. 1977. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Berry, Wendell. 1981. *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural*. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Berry, Wendell. 1990. *What Are People For?* San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Berry, Wendell. 1995. *Another Turn of the Crank*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press.
- Berry, Wendell. 2003. *Citizenship Papers*. Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard.
- Berry, Wendell. 2009. *Bringing It To the Table*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press.
- Cantrell, Bridget & Chuck Dean. 2005. *Down Range: To Iraq and Back*. Seattle: Wordsmith Publishing.
- Creswell, John. 2007. Chapter 1, "A Framework for Design," In *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- James Dao and Dan Frosch. New York Times, April 25th, 2010. *Feeling Warehoused in Army's Trauma Care Units: G.I.'s Depict Life of Pills and Isolation*.

- Department of Defense. 2010. "Legal Residence/ Home Address for Service Members Ever Deployed : As of January 31, 2010." Defense Manpower Data Center, Contingency Tracking System Deployment File. March 1, 2010. Obtained by Veterans for Common Sense using the Freedom of Information Act.
- Department of Veterans Affairs. 2010. *Veterans Health Administration, Office of Rural Health: Strategic Plan 2010-2014*. Available online. http://www.ruralhealth.va.gov/RURALHEALTH/docs/VHA_ORH_StrategicPlan_2010_2014.pdf. Accessed June 7, 2010.
- Environmental Protection Agency. "Demographics." Last updated September 10, 2009. <http://www.epa.gov/agriculture/ag101/demographics.html>. Accessed April 14, 2010.
- Fals-Borda, Orlando. 2001. "Participatory (Action) Research in Social Theory: Origins and Challenges," In *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (Peter Reason; Hillary Bradbury, Eds.), pp. 27-37. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Farmer-Veteran Coalition. 2010. "What We Do." Last updated 2010. <http://www.farmvetco.org/who-we-are/what-we-do/>. Accessed February 11, 2010.
- Fischer, Frank. 2005. "Community Inquiry and Local Knowledge: The Political and Methodological Foundations of Participatory Research," Chapter 9 of *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Francis, Mark and Randolph T. Hester Jr., eds. 1990. *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Gaventa, John. 1991. "Toward a Knowledge Democracy: Viewpoints and Participatory Research in North America," In Fals-Borda, Orlando and M.A. Rahman, *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*. New York: Apex Press.
- Harding, Sandra. 1993. Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: "What Is Strong Objectivity?" In *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter. pp. 49-82. New York: Routledge.
- Helphand, Kenneth. 2006. *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*. San Antonio: Trinity University Press.

- Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences. September 15, 2009. "Iraq Troops' PTSD Rate As High As 35 Percent, Analysis Finds" *ScienceDaily*. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/09/090914151629.htm>. Accessed March 10, 2010.
- Iraq Veterans Against The War (IVAW) & Aaron Glantz. 2008. *Winter Soldier Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations*. pp. 143-173. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Kaplan, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan. 1989. *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, Rachel and Stephen Kaplan. 1990. "Restorative Experience: The Healing Power of Nearby Nature." In *The Meaning of Gardens: Idea, Place, and Action*, eds. Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester, Jr. pp.238-243. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Katz, Ira R. Email to Chasen, Ev. 13 Feb. 2008. Available online: http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/VA_email_021308.pdf. Accessed April 17, 2010.
- Kingsolver, Barbara, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver. 2008. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. New York: HarperPerennial.
- Lyons, Judith. 2007. "Commentary on MHAT-IV: Struggling to Reduce the Psychological Impact of War" *Traumatology*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 40-45.
- Magdoff, Fred, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel. 2000. "Overview," pp. 7-21 In Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick H. Buttel (eds.) *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Malbran, Pia. 2007. "Veteran Suicides: How We Got the Numbers" CBS News. http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/11/13/cbsnews_investigates/main3498625.shtml. Accessed March 22, 2010.
- Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. 1993. *Ecofeminism*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publications.
- Nestle, Marion. 2007. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. pp.11-13. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD). Date Unknown. "National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet" Available Online

http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_what_is_ptsd.html.
Accessed March 20, 2009.

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans. 2010. "FAQ About Homeless Veterans."
<http://www.nchv.org/background.cfm>. Accessed March 22, 2010.

Pollan, Michael. 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*.
New York: Penguin Press.

Pollan, Michael. 2008. *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*. New York: Penguin
Press.

Sackville-West, Vita. 1946. *The Garden*. pp.13. London: Francis Lincoln, LTD.

Schlosser, Eric. 2001. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*.
Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York:
Harper Colophon Books.

Shiva, Vandana, et al. 1991. *Biodiversity: Social and Ecological Perspectives*. New
York: Zed Books.

Shiva, Vandana. 1997. *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. Boston, MA:
South End Press.

Shiva, Vandana. 2000. *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply*.
Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Shiva, Vandana. 2005. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. Cambridge,
Mass.: South End Press.

Shiva, Vandana (ed.). 2007. *Manifestos on the Future of Food & Seed*. Cambridge,
Mass.: South End Press.

Shoemaker, C.A. 2004. "Horticulture Therapy: Comparisons with Other Allied Therapies
and Current Status of the Profession" *Acta Horticulturae (ISHS)* 639:173-178.

Spurlock, Morgan. 2006. *Don't Eat This Book: Fast Food and the Supersizing of
America*. New York: Berkley Books.

Tyson, Ann Scott. "Youths in Rural US Are Drawn to Military." *The Washington Post*.
November 4, 2005.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. “Economic, Statistics, and Marketing Information System.” Website.

<http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/MannUsda/viewDocumentInfo.do?documentID=1259>. Updated February, 2010. Accessed June, 2010.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. “Employment Situation of Veterans –2009.” Washington DC: March 12, 2010.

<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/vet.pdf>.

Wilson, E.O. 1984. *Biophilia: The Human Bond With Other Species*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.