

Keeping the wineglass full

Sustaining winegrape grower legacy in Lodi, California



Photo: Dale Goff Photography

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Prepared for the Lodi Winegrape Commission

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Background

The past two decades have seen the emergence of sustainability partnerships¹ with the mission of responding to the economic, environmental, and social challenges faced by local growers. Partnerships encourage the adoption of sustainability practices through education and outreach activities including field days, tailgate meetings, self-assessment workbooks, and the establishment of third-party certification programs. California's sustainable viticulture partnerships are among the most developed and successful [1], and the Lodi Winegrape Commission's (LWC) Sustainable Winegrowing Program and the Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing have been recognized as frontrunners in the viticulture sector. Research has shown that grower participation in the LWC's programs increases the likelihood of sustainability-oriented practice adoption [2]. Continuing this success into the future depends on The Lodi Winegrape Commission's ability to adapt existing and develop new outreach programs that meet growers' changing needs, and to recognize shifts in the greater agrifood system which Lodi viticulture is nested within. This research report offers insights into possible directions for partnership improvement, and is written for the LWC's staff, board of directors, and constituents.

The Question

What do Lodi winegrape growers seek to sustain? The objective of this study was to identify the underlying and culturally embedded motivations for participation in sustainability programs and for achieving the broader goal of agricultural sustainability. This study shows that generational succession of the family farm enterprise and preserving the family's agricultural legacy is the underlying motivation for Lodi winegrape growers to participate in local sustainability programs and sustainability efforts more broadly. In the academic and viticulture industry discourse about sustainability, culture is often placed in the background or exists only as an implicit assumption, while more concrete drivers such as economic returns to growers, environmental implications, or pest management draw attention. This report aims to bring culture to the forefront.

The Study

This report is an abridged version of Matthew Hoffman's M.S. thesis, titled *Keeping the wineglass full: Exploring the intersection of sustainable viticulture and sustaining winegrape grower legacy in Lodi, California*, submitted to the Department of Sociology and the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. The LWC and Iowa State University's 2008-09 Gordon Bultena Memorial Research Grant funded this study. A version of this work was awarded the Best Graduate Student Paper Award at the 2009 Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society annual meeting, and is in preparation for peer review publication. Matthew is now a Ph.D. student in the University of California, Davis's Graduate Group in Geography. He is a member of a National Science Foundation funded research group studying grower decision-making, social networks, and sustainability partnership effectiveness in California viticulture. In 2011 the research group will be carrying out the third Lodi Winegrape Growers' Survey.

Methodology

The findings and results presented here were produced from qualitative and quantitative analysis of face-to-face interviews with 14 Lodi winegrape growers participating in the Lodi Rules for Sus-

¹A "sustainability partnership" is defined as an intentional multi-year relationship between at least growers, a grower's organization, and one or more scientists to extend knowledge about agricultural sustainability through applied science and practical application. We adapted Warner's definition of an "agroecological partnership" (2007:67) to better suit the broad set of sustainability goals.

tainable Winegrowing third-party certification program.² Interviewees were chosen to represent a spectrum of differences among Lodi Rules growers. Cliff Ohmart, then the LWC's sustainability director, guided the sampling process. The interviews were conducted in November, 2008, digitally recorded, and then analyzed to identify emergent themes.

Theory

The interwoven relationships among the concepts of legacy, cultural capital, and human capital [3] form the theoretical fabric from which this study is tailored. While those outside of the social sciences may at first consider these concepts esoteric, they have practical importance because they succinctly describe the key elements of Lodi's winegrape grower culture. They might be useful for the LWC in understanding the behaviors of Lodi winegrape growers.

Cultural capital is the perspective through which people interpret the world - it is their world-view. It can be described as the values, ways of thinking, perceptions of others, ways of acting, religion and spiritual beliefs, and customs. Cultural capital also dictates what is believed to be good or bad, what constitutes legitimate knowledge, what justifies the use of power, and what possibilities are perceived as realistic for individuals or the community. This study deals with cultural capital at the individual and community level. Cultural capital is discussed in terms of identity, human values, and way of life.

Legacy is the generational succession of cultural capital. Parents "leave more than just material goods to their children. They pass on an understanding of society and their role in it, speech, dress, and ways of being—cultural capital—that in turn affect the choices their children make. Legacy is what families, communities, groups, and nations pass on to the next generation" [3:55]. In the context of Lodi winegrape growing, legacy translates into sustaining Lodi's agricultural culture and values, individual and collective identity as winegrape growers, and farming as a way of life.

Human capital is a measure of an individual's potential, ability, and competency. Forms of human capital include professional and technical knowledge, interpersonal skills, self-esteem, leadership abilities, or familiarity with local ecological and social systems. Human capital can be gained through various means including formal education, personal experience, on-the-job training, or inheritance of local folk knowledge. It influences an individual's ability to contribute to their self, family, and community. In the context of Lodi viticulture, human capital translates into a grower's ability to manage a viable and equitable farm enterprise, and to be a positively contributing member of the regional' agricultural system. Sustainability partnerships provide learning resources for the development of a grower's human capital.

Findings

The "Three Es" of sustainability, ecological health, economic viability, and social equity [4], is a widely used conceptualization of sustainable agriculture and is effective at identifying the objectives and properties of sustainability [5]. However, the Three Es fall short at conceptualizing the roles cultural capital, legacy, and human capital play in sustainability.

Through what lens do Lodi winegrape growers view the concept of sustainable agriculture? Growers draw on the Three Es framework, but extend the idea further to include legacy. Generational succession of farm enterprise ownership and operation is the primary consideration of

²Twenty Lodi winegrape growers were initially interviewed: 14 Lodi Rules certified growers and six uncertified growers. Due to practical constraints, the final analysis used the Lodi Rules interviews only. The six unanalyzed interviews will provide valuable data for future studies.

growers when discussing the subject of sustainability, and is the key finding of this study. Ecological health, social equity, and economic viability are the short- and medium-term goals, but all three are viewed as playing a cumulative and supporting role in achieving the long-term goal of generational succession. Growers describe their human capital as a critical intellectual tool enabling them to better manage their farm enterprise and to more effectively achieve their sustainability goals.

Figure 1 illustrates the grower conceptualization of sustainable agriculture by relating key aspects of sustainability to one another. Ecological health and social equity are considered essential properties of sustainability. These agricultural resources, when stewarded, positively contribute to economic viability of the farm enterprise. A first set of feedback loops (Colored grey in Figure 1) represent the circular relationship between economic viability and resource stewardship, and encompass the process of sustainable farm enterprise management (Outlined in brown in Figure 1). Growers assert that economic viability is a minimum requirement for basic farm enterprise function and resource stewardship. Moreover, economic viability is the platform for generational succession. In contemporary agriculture, it is necessary to create an attractive and realistic opportunity for the next generation to continue farming as a way of life. Economic viability is a major factor in creating such opportunities. Perpetuating a farm family’s farm tenure can only be realized through generational succession. A second set of feedback loops (Colored black in Figure 1) represents the circular relationship between generational succession and effective farm enterprise management, and encompasses the process sustaining farm family legacy (Outlined in purple in Figure 1).

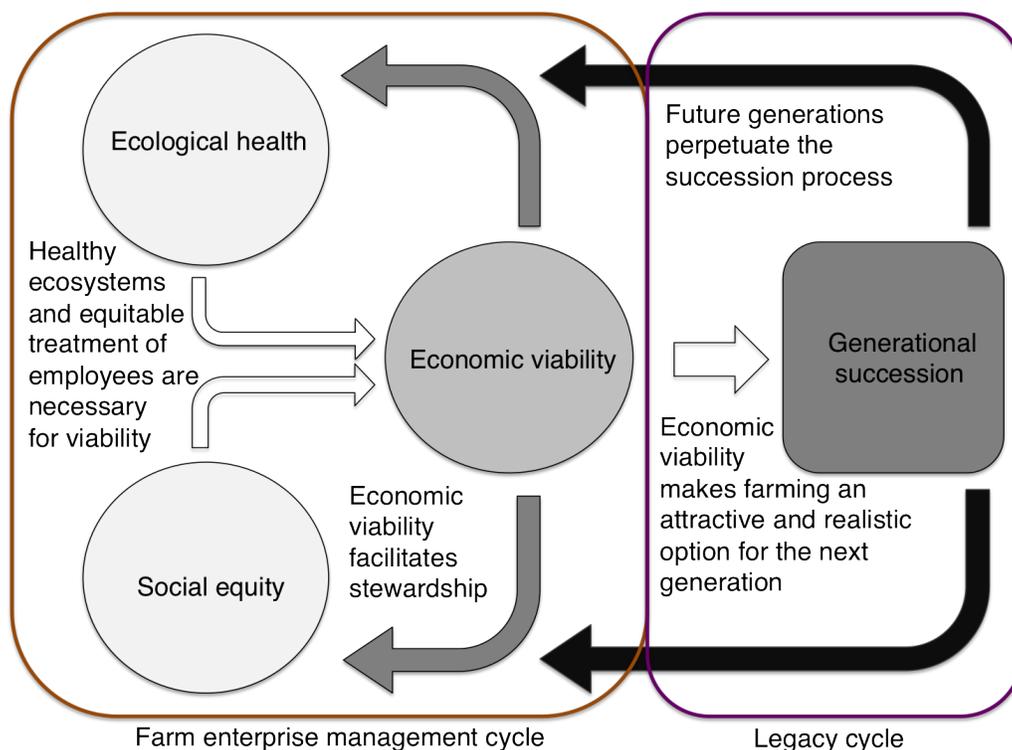


Figure 1: Grower conceptualization of sustainable agriculture

In theory, the upcoming generation, provided with sufficient opportunity and education will effectively manage the farm enterprise, continue to steward the natural and social resources, will maintain economic viability, and perpetuate the cycle of succession. Lodi winegrape growers see

themselves as bound by the structure of agriculture's economic system, and economic viability is the axis about which the stewardship-legacy cycle revolves, and human capital as the force that keeps the cycle in motion.

Human capital plays an important role in all stages in the cycle in Figure 1. The process of sustainable farm enterprise management (Brown) and the process of sustaining farm family legacy (Purple) both depend on growers, employees, and family making appropriate decisions.

Results

Grower definitions of sustainable agriculture provide support for the grower conceptualization presented above. While growers place the highest value on generational succession, economic viability constitutes the focus of pragmatic discussion about sustainability. Economic viability is the hub from which grower definitions revolve around. Growers perceive economic viability to be the means for both resource stewardship and generational succession.

Six (43%) growers begin their definition with economic viability. Fourteen (100%) address economic viability in their definition. Thirteen (93%) growers report their ability for resource stewardship is positively related to economic viability. It enables stewardship, and provides a realistic and attractive opportunity for the upcoming generation to continue the farm enterprise. The below quotations from two growers are representative.

"To me, sustainable is sustainable. It is making a system work for you and not taking out more than you put in. Twenty years from now my kids won't be cleaning up a mess. It's not depleting your resources... You have to be thinking long term."

"I'm not a subsistence farmer. Farmers no longer grow all their own food, have chickens, and all that sort of stuff. That is the old world. In this world farmers are businessmen. I have kids, and I'm just as concerned with the environment as those who are not involved in agriculture. In sustainable agriculture the environment is very important, [and] our company has come to understand is the human factor. If something is not good for our employees it is not good for us in the long run. I want my grandkids, who are four and seven, to be involved in California agriculture. If we are to achieve this, we have to be doing business in a manner that allows us to continue to be around... We need to be attuned to the environment and attuned to our employees, but at the end of the day the bottom line has to be black... Sustainable farming is not just one thing; it is a system."

The many generations growers' families have been involved in agriculture suggest that legacy is a defining characteristic of Lodi agriculture. Thirteen (93%) of the growers interviewed were from multi-generational farming families. All 13 expressed aspirations to sustain their legacy as Lodi winegrape growers. Eleven (79%) were from multi-generational Lodi farming families. The mean number of generations in agriculture was 3.5, and the mean number of generations in Lodi agriculture was 2.8. Figure 2 depicts the distribution of generations in agriculture, and generations in Lodi agriculture.

Recall that legacy is cultural capital passed from one generation to the next. Families and communities pass on identity, values, and way of life to the upcoming generation. These components of legacy are elaborated on below, and quotations from interview transcripts capture the grower's voice.

Identity. All 14 (100%) interviewed growers report a strong individual, family, and community identity as farmers. Identity dictates how one sees him or herself and directs the role they play in society. Identifying is central to legacy, and Lodi growers have a well-developed sense of identity

as farmers. They wish to see themselves in their children. Identity transcends the individual, and extends through space to include the family and community, and through time to include future generations. Part of sustaining legacy is imbuing the upcoming generation with a sense of farmer

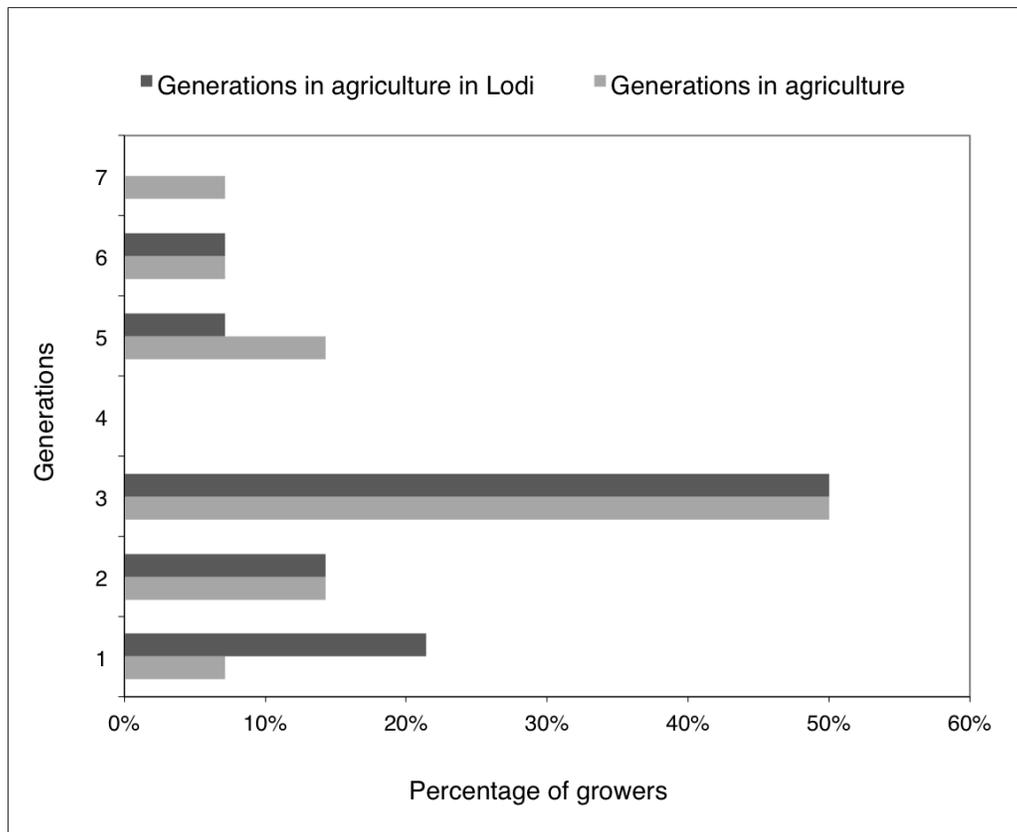


Figure 2: Generations in agriculture

identify. Farmer identity was a powerful influence in growers’ individual decisions to continue the family occupation, and expressed itself in other forms including the decision to study agriculture in college. Thirteen growers (93%) earned degrees either explicitly or closely related to agriculture. Quotations from four growers reflect these results.

“I’m proud to be out there in the truck. I have a dirty truck and I’m dirty all the time. My hands are less than beautiful. This is the identity I like. I’m proud to be a farmer. I’m a farmer. I’m a farmer!”

“When I was thinking about what I wanted to do for a lifetime, I realized that I wanted to work for my family name and continue our tradition. There is an element of pride for the land we farm, our family, and business name. All that came into play and brought me back to the farm.”

“Making the decision to study viticulture at [college] was not a difficult decision for me. I had known for a long time I wanted to farm. There were some periods of time I thought maybe I should go off before coming back to the ranch. While in college, there were some opportunities [abroad] for advising and vineyard development. I decided against it. I wanted to stay home, I wanted to farm, and I wanted to start a family.”

“My freshman year at Delta Community College I took some of the electronics classes, and I knew right away. I went right back to agriculture. I was just more interested in farming. It just made sense.”

Environmental values. Values influence decision-making, trigger concerns, and inspire hopes. When forced to choose between two options, decision-makers reference their values as a guide to select the best answer. Values come into play when asking and answering the pragmatic questions, “What should we do?” and “How should we do what we want to do?” [6:8]. Values help people make decisions. “[V]alues are relatively stable principles that help us make decisions when our preferences are in conflict and thus convey some sense of what we consider good” [7:335]. Lodi growers reference their values when making farm enterprise management decisions. Here we focus on environmental values. These values inform growers’ approach to farm management. As the quotations from two growers suggest, ecological wellbeing is never far from their mind.

“It is important to see the earth unpaved.”

“My dad and uncle were hunters, and we would also backpack all over the Western United States when I was in high school. I still do that now. Appreciating nature is a large portion of who we are. Because my father took me backpacking and into the out-of-doors, I have earned a deep appreciation for nature and our place in the ecosystem. I appreciate the natural land on our property very much.”

Way of life. Farming provides growers and their families with a way of life they appreciate. This includes working in and with the natural environment, living in rural and agricultural landscapes, living in their home-town and near family, having a career that allows for autonomy and individuality, having a flexible work schedule, and having an interesting, dynamic, and diverse job. Lodi growers aspire to provide their children with the opportunity to earn a similar way of life.

“I was in the whole med school crunch of pressure to get good grades. I did that for two years. In my third year I took this career class. I sat down and thought of everything that was important to me. I wanted to be my own boss. I liked being out-doors. I liked living with my family out in the country. Then I realized, Wow, my father farms, what an opportunity for me.”

“Being out here in the country is important to me I don’t like the city as much because all that useful ground is covered over. I enjoy being outside and being able to walk a half-mile with my dog and not seeing anyone else.”

“[Farming] is probably one of the most diverse careers I could ever choose. To be a farmer you have to be a biologist, a chemist, a politician, a marketing agent, a sales guy, a lawyer, you have to be all these different things. I’ll go from sitting behind my desk doing I.T. stuff to going outside and actually farming. There are not many careers where you can jump back and forth between so many disciplines What I like most about farming is the fact that it is not stagnant.”

“The unique thing about farming is that you are your own boss. That is what I like best about farming. I am the decision maker I love being the sole proprietor and the one in control of my destiny.”

Generational succession. Generational succession is the process by which cultural capital is passed to the upcoming generation. Realizing the goal of a sustained legacy comes about when the process of succession is successful. Lodi growers want to pass on to their children more than a title to their land, vineyards, and equipment; they want to pass on an economically viable farm enterprise capable of producing a livelihood. They want to offer their children an attractive and realistic opportunity to continue the family way of life. They leave the final decision to their children, but they take it upon themselves to provide the opportunity.

“I won’t force my children to follow in my footsteps, but I want my kids to have the choice. I had that choice. My parents never forced any of us to come back. They presented it is a good option that we could participate in if we wanted to. They wanted us to go away to college. We had the choice to do whatever we wanted to. But now we are all here, and my parents have been good about offering a place in the family business if we wanted it. I want to give my kids that same option.”

Human capital. Twelve (86%) of interviewed growers agree that participation in Lodi’s sustainability program makes them a “better farmer”. The process of participation, especially of certification, is rigorous and demands that growers critique and reflect of their management approach. Sustainability programs encourage and require growers to reflect on their definition of sustainability, set short- and long-term sustainability goals and initiate strategies, increase attentiveness to their vineyards and employees through detailed record keeping and data analysis, make systematic decisions, and requires that growers be familiar with the sustainability practices outlined in workbooks. The rigors of sustainability programs transform the daily activity of farming into an intensive learning experience that results in the development of human capital. The below quotations from two growers convey the message.

“I think the process of getting certified makes you analyze every bit of your farming, and question everything you do, and ask if there is a better way to be doing this. Secondly it helps you understand what you are doing as opposed to doing it the same old way. It is an educational and a learning process. It is an effort. It is kind of like going back to school for farming. We farmers either think we know everything or get into a comfortable pattern I think it changes how I see my farm within the ecosystem. What you get out of this process is you become more aware. You become more aware of what your impact is on the farm. To say it makes you more aware is a great way to summarize what you get out of the process.”

“I’m thinking I’m doing things right, I’ve done this in the past, I’ve done organics, you know I’m a pretty aware and enlightened guy. I was part of the first writing of the workbook. We were sitting around the table analyzing chapters. I’m looking at all this information talking to researchers and I’m seeing all these holes in my own program After an experience like mine, growers can either shut the book in disgust or say, wow, I have some room to grow. I always thought I was doing the right thing. Then I exposed myself to other ideas, particularly through such a great workbook, and I realized I had many holes in my sustainable viticulture farming plan.”

Conclusions and partnership implications

The intent of this study was to step back from the technical details of sustainability efforts in viticulture and paint a broader, culturally symbolic picture of the sustainability landscape. We find that growers give strong attention to the legacy process, which consists of the long-term goal of generational succession. Perpetuating the legacy cycle is the underlying and culturally embedded motivation for Lodi winegrape growers to participate in local sustainability programs. Nested within this larger legacy process is the smaller process of farm enterprise management, which consists of the short-term goals of ecological health, social equity, and economic viability. Human capital is a measure of a person’s potential, ability, and competency, and in Lodi winegrape growing this translates into a measure of a grower’s ability to manage the farm enterprise in a manner that achieves the long-term goal of generational succession through realizing the short-term goals of ecological health, social equity, and economic viability.

A significant body of research has shown that partnerships’ ability to inform grower practices must not be underestimated [1, 2, 8, 9], and they are poised to support the development of grower human capital. In light of this, three concluding remarks are offered.

First, framing sustainability in the context of generational succession may be a way to bridge boundaries created by locally contended sustainability related issues that would otherwise politically pit grower groups against one another or against partnerships. Not all stakeholders can agree on a single definition of sustainability let alone a strategy of achieving sustainability. However, the notion of sustaining family farm legacy through generational succession may be generalizable across the entire grower population. This study only interviewed growers participating in the Lodi Rules. Within the sample, several stark differences were observed; nevertheless, all interviewed growers strongly expressed the view that sustaining their family farm legacy was of utmost importance. Given the anecdotal evidence that multi-generational farming families characterize Lodi's agricultural community, there is strong reason to believe that family farm legacy is an established cultural norm that spans political, ideological, economic, spatial, and other differences, and may be used as a platform shared partisanship.

Second, this study brings attention to the importance of succession planning, and suggests that it be considered as a formal sustainability practice. Farm family legacy and generational succession are of supreme importance to Lodi winegrape growers, but recent studies suggest that the California wine industry is ill prepared for succession. A recent study found that a majority of California wineries foresee ownerships transitions in the coming decade, but a majority of those wishing to maintain family control are unprepared to transition the farm to the upcoming generation [10]. Further studies are needed to gain a firm understanding of the status of succession planning among Lodi growers. Partnerships can improve sustainability outreach by including succession services in their outreach agendas, and by explicitly adding succession planning to sustainability workbooks and certification criteria.

Finally, the "whole-farm" approach has been a hallmark of Lodi's Sustainable Winegrowing Program, but as Lodi agriculture continues down the path of commodity to value-based agriculture, what constitutes the "whole" is also changing. Sustaining family farm legacy was once dependant on well-managed vineyards, but increasingly depends on well-managed wineries. The establishment of locally owned, value-based owned wineries and the set of accompanying activities demands a much broader menu of education and outreach services that address not only commodity viticulture, but also value-based viticulture, enology, winery management, tasting room management, wine club management, marketing and branding, and distribution and sales. This resource-intensive demand presents a significant challenge to partnerships that are subject to the current economic recession. Economically thrifty yet effective outreach methods exist. Social learning models of agricultural outreach are becoming widely implemented and studied, and promise much potential in that they take advantage of existing knowledge among local practitioners and established social networks of knowledge transfer within local communities of practitioners. Internet-based version of social learning models further conserves investment of time and financial cost.

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