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The developers and the independents: white Mississippi cattle producers' perspectives on government farm programs and success

Kelli J. Russell

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The developers and the independents: white Mississippi cattle producers' perspectives on
government farm programs and success

By

Kelli J. Russell

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science
in Sociology
in the Department of Sociology

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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The developers and the independents: white Mississippi cattle producers' perspectives on
government farm programs and success

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In this thesis, I explore how white producers of U.S. agriculture's top commodity—cattle—understand participation in government farm programs. As such, the central research question guiding this research is: how do Mississippi cattle producers portray their decisions to pursue (or not pursue) government farm programs? Specifically, I offer insights into how farmers reconcile tension between being independent/self-sufficient and accepting government subsidies. Using data from 289 hours of participant observation at agricultural events and 33 interviews with producers, I examine sociologically how these understandings of farm program participation relate to producers' ideological notions of "success" and how race and gender shape these understandings.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, David. Thank you for always believing in me, encouraging me, and supporting my endeavors. I would have not been able to complete this without you. I love you and I am so thankful for you!

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There are numerous individuals that I would like to thank for their encouragement, help, support, and guidance on this project. I want to begin by thanking my committee chair, Dr. Margaret Hagerman, for her advice and mentorship. I am extremely grateful for her guidance throughout this process and her support of my research. Additionally, thank you to my thesis committee—Dr. Leslie Hossfeld, Dr. Braden Leap, and Dr. Lindsey Peterson—for their support and help. This project would not have been the same without each of their input and expertise. Thank you!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

From foodstuffs that constitute the meals of Americans to industrial products like ethanol that power vehicles, Americans interact with U.S. agriculture multiple times a day. Consequently, the economic and political reach of agriculture in the United States is immense. Economically, the farm production sector of the agriculture industry produces 1 percent of the nation's gross domestic product and 1.4 percent of the U.S. employment (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018b). Nearly \$1 trillion of the U.S. gross domestic product stems from agriculture or agriculture related industries (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014a, 2018b). Politically, agriculture production often controls discussions about trade, government subsidies, food support programs, and even elections (Fritze 2018; Nestle 2016; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018e; Wilde 2013).

While the economics and politics of farm production dominate the news and scholarly study, the perspectives of *actual farmers* involved in U.S. agriculture are often ignored (Lobao and Meyer 2001; Lyson and Guptill 2004; Wuthnow 2015). Agriculture is a rapidly changing, government subsidized industry with a shrinking, aging population of producers (Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2015; Lobao and Meyer 2004; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014a). As agriculture changes, little is known about the perspectives and experiences of the 3.2 million farmers/producers and 2.1 million farms in the United States outside of the demographic and basic production statistics collected by the U.S.

Department of Agriculture (USDA) (Gardner 2002; Lobao and Meyer 2001; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014a).¹ Questions of why and how farmers do their work are largely unexplored as farming today “eludes understanding” and the voices of producers are rarely heard (Wuthnow 2015:3).

In this thesis, I explore how producers of U.S. agriculture’s top commodity—cattle—understand participation in government farm programs. As such, the central research question guiding this research is: how do Mississippi cattle producers portray their decisions to pursue (or not pursue) government farm programs? Specifically, I offer insights into how farmers reconcile tension between being independent/self-sufficient and accepting government subsidies. I examine sociologically how these understandings of farm program participation relate to producers’ ideological notions of “success” and how race and gender shape these understandings.

Rural research, broadly speaking, has historically ignored the perspectives of people of color and women. In response, contemporary critical rural research has purposefully made new and important strides with respect to questioning how power and inequality operate in rural places (Cloke and Little 1997; Murdoch and Pratt 1997). This scholarship explores, in part, the experiences and perspectives of women and people of color in the context of rural communities, schools, and agriculture (Cloke and Little 1997; Dolhinow 2010; Rushing 2017; Voyles 2015). Although this recent critical rural scholarship is greatly needed, studying how power and privilege operate in society also includes understanding the perspectives and behaviors of those in positions of power and

¹ In this thesis, I use “farmer” and “producer” interchangeably as the individuals within my study described themselves regularly using both terms.

authority: white men (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006; Feagin and O'Brien 2003; Hagerman 2018; Khan 2012; Leap 2017).

Over a two year period, I interviewed 33 white men who identified as cattle producers and attended over 50 agricultural events across Mississippi with farmers. Wearing black cowboy boots and carrying a moleskin notebook, I met producers at their farms, cattle auctions, cattle shows, agricultural organizational meetings, local Mississippi State University Extension offices, and small town restaurants. I viewed their cattle, saw their farms, ate meals with them, sometimes met their families or hired workers, and accompanied them to various local, regional, state, and national agricultural events and organizational meetings.

Through 29 months of participant observation and 33 interviews, I found that white, Mississippi cattle producers have differing ideologies of what it means to be a “good farmer.” Both relate to the American Dream and producers’ whiteness and performance of masculinities. The intersection of race, place, gender, and class shaped how these producers viewed success in relation to their interactions with a government institution.

My argument is delineated across the subsequent six chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide a general overview of U.S. agriculture and cattle production. Chapter 3 is a review of pertinent literature on ideology, the American Dream, rural masculinities, and whiteness. My methodological approach is found in Chapter 4, and I discuss my research findings in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, I present a discussion and conclusion of this research.

CHAPTER II

U.S. AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND POLICY

Agriculture is a dynamic, ever changing industry—from both a production and policy standpoint. In this chapter, I provide a general overview of agricultural production and policy in the contemporary United States. Additionally, I discuss the background and justification of the specific areas of focus for this thesis: the U.S. cattle industry. I argue that the federally subsidized nature of agriculture, the industry’s importance to the nation’s economy, and the history of inequality within the industry all warrant the scholarly study of factors associated with success in agriculture and the use of government farm programs.

Food and Agriculture Production in the United States Today

Although the majority of Americans may not directly know a farmer/producer, most know an individual that works somewhere within the agri-food system. According to USDA’s Economic Research Service, nearly 21 million—that is 11.1 percent—of the U.S. employed population works in agriculture, food, and related industries (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017a). As stated in the preceding chapter, farming alone accounts for 2.6 million American jobs, which is 1.4 percent of the total employed population (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017a, 2018b). Agriculture is an extremely important part of the U.S. economy and the major driving industry in rural areas (Joint Economic Committee of the United States Congress 2013).

In addition to being a key industry within the domestic sector, agriculture also plays a key role in U.S. foreign trade. Agricultural and food related industries account for 5.5 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and exports amount to \$1.27 trillion dollars and generate over 1 million additional new jobs (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017a; Vilsack 2017). While exact trade impact figures shift with policy changes, the United States has had a positive trade export balance of farm products since 1980 (Wilde 2013).

Agriculture production in the United States is extremely varied. Hence, farms and farming operations are often categorized by their geography, farm type, or by commodity grouping (Wilde 2013). These informal and sometimes formal designations are used by producers in decision making, government entities in policy-making, and the consumer in making food choices.

Geography is a key determinant in agricultural production for farmers because food production is dependent on the environment where it is produced. Geographic environmental factors inform what products can be produced. Traditionally, agricultural production is divided by both material and human geography in the following ways: by climate zone, soil type, state boundaries, and regional boundaries.

Farmers select which commodities to grow by their geographic location and environment combined with their personal decisions about which crop would be the best option to grow in that growing year. Although the general public thinks of farming regions along state and traditional regional lines (Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, and Pacific), the USDA has divided the United States into “farm resource regions” that consider physiographic, climate, soil, and crop production factors with the advent of new

technology and data sharing (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2000). There are nine farm resource regions: Northern Crescent, Heartland, Northern Great Plains, Basin and Range, Eastern Uplands, Fruitful Rim, Prairie Gateway, Mississippi Portal, and Southern Seaboard (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2000). Because of the different factors influencing production decisions in each region, the various farm resource regions differ greatly. In this thesis, I focus only Mississippi, which is included in two regions: the Mississippi Portal and the Southern Seaboard. I describe the selection of Mississippi as the research setting in detail in Chapter 4.

There are two main ways of classifying farm types—by incorporation and size. There are two general types of farm incorporation in the United States—family and nonfamily farms. Family farms are those that are owned by one individual or multiple individuals that are related (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017b). Nonfamily farms are often termed “corporate” farms and comprise 1.2 percent of all farms in the United States (Hoppe 2017). Farms categorized by size are classified by gross cash farm income (GCFI), not by acreage. Gross income, rather than actual land average size, is used because some commodities are more acreage intensive but lower valued.

A farm’s designation within the farm typology influences several factors within production. Size affects production practices because the amount of GCFI impacts producers’ abilities to pursue government programs, grants, and loans because some programs differ by income level or farm typology designation. Production size also influences farmers’ options to secure outside funding as the more assets they own, the more options they have for collateral with traditional lenders. Lastly, their size and value of assets impacts how they are financially able to make production choices regarding risk

management, diversification, and the adoption of new technologies, practices, or innovations. In this thesis, I outline the various farm typologies because although the majority of the farming operations of the producers I interviewed are categorized as small family farms, I did speak with one farmer whose farm typology classification restricted him from being eligible for certain federal farm programs.

The last and most obvious categorization of farm operations is by commodity grouping. A commodity is an unrefined or unprocessed agricultural product. The commodity identifier is commonly used by producers, the public, and the government alike.

While there are numerous general agricultural organizations, producers often separate by commodities into commodity organizations. By grouping by commodity, they are able to build networks with other farmers growing similar crops as well as strengthen their lobbying and research efforts for their specific commodity. Examples of well-known national commodity organizations include: National Cotton Council, American Soybean Association, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, U.S. Poultry and Egg Association, and National Corn Growers Association.

Commodity designations are also extremely important for government entities in policy-making. When constructing federal agricultural policy, legislators often work in specific programs and grants for particular commodities (Wilde 2013). New programs and modification to existing programs for specific commodities is oftentimes in response to volatility within that specific commodity market or due to “flaws” in previous farm bill’s coverage of that commodity (e.g., Vogel 2018).

In the early twentieth century, farms often produced a large number of commodities; however, today farm operations are extremely specialized (Gardner 2002; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018g). Many farmers now concentrate on producing only specific commodities due to the specialized equipment needed and higher input costs across crops. Additionally, trade agreements, government subsidies, consumer buying and consumption habits have changed the demand and supply (as well as profitability) of certain commodities. In a continually changing commodity market, the top five commodities by value of sales in the United States today are: cattle (\$76.4 billion), corn (\$67.3 billion), poultry and eggs (\$42.8 billion), soybeans (\$38.7 billion) and dairy (\$35.5 billion) (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014d).

Cattle Production in the United States

Examining farmers' perspectives in U.S. agriculture is difficult because of the sheer size of the industry, diversity of commodities, and the breadth of farm policies. To adequately and thoroughly examine farmers' perspectives, a specific focus is necessary. Although there are several manners of categorizing production and narrowing focus listed in the above section, in this thesis I opted to focus on one commodity in a single state. I detail the reasons for this decision below by providing a background on the U.S. cattle industry and U.S livestock farm programs. My justification for selecting a single state as my research site is highlighted in the next chapter.

Census data show that crop production, combined, accounts for the largest value share of U.S. agricultural production; however, cattle are the top single commodity by

value of sales in the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2016b)². Cattle production and sales are a \$76.4 billion dollar industry, accounting for 19 percent of all total agricultural sales in the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014d, 2015a). Unlike commodities, such as corn, that are concentrated within a specific region in the U.S., livestock production is dispersed across the nation and is not concentrated in one geographic region or climate zone (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2017; Wilde 2013).³

Because of the widespread geographic diversity in production locations across the United States, there is not a “handbook” of production or standard set of operating practices for raising cattle. This is extremely different from other commodities (e.g. oranges, rice, or cotton) that require a specific set of climate and soil conditions and production practices to thrive. A second reason that no guide to production exists is because there is limited supplier consolidation in the cattle industry as compared to other agricultural commodities. When purchasing inputs, grain and oilseed crop producers have fewer choices than livestock producers because of the standardized/common (and oftentimes government regulated) practices that accompany planting particular varieties

² Throughout this thesis, I use data from the 2012 Census of Agriculture. The Census of Agriculture is conducted every five years, and at the time of writing, the 2017 data have not been released. The Census of Agriculture data are not publically available on the farm or household level; however, some county data is available in a limited fashion on the USDA website. USDA provides comprehensive statewide and national reports and fact sheets in addition to the county data found online. I am using state and national data for this thesis.

³ Cattle finishing—when cattle are sent to feedlots, which are also known as confined animal feeding operations (CAFO)—occurs predominantly in the Midwest near cheap feed grain and meatpacking facilities. Hence, when examining state-by-state figures of live cattle numbers, there is a Midwest skew; however, beef cattle production occurs very evenly scattered across the United States. In this thesis, I am focusing on production not end-stage finishing; therefore, I am using figures on cattle production/farming to make my argument not live cattle figures.

of seeds or using certain brands of herbicides and insecticides.⁴ While cattle producers often select to use dewormers, vaccines, and other industry-supplied products on their farm, there are not requirements for production in the same manner that a corn producer must select a seed variety to plant and follow that variety's specific recommendations and corresponding herbicides (e.g., Roundup Ready corn or soybeans). Due to the lack of standardized practices in all aspects of cattle production (e.g., feeding rations, grazing habitats, water needs, optimal calving season, weed maintenance practices, etc.) and absence of input/supplier consolidation, cattle producers have far more control and input in their production processes than other commodity producers.

In addition to being the top valued commodity, the most widely geographically produced commodity, and one of the least standardized commodities, cattle production is the largest category of agricultural operations by farm numbers in the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2016a). According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, there are 619,172 farms and ranches in the United States that produce beef cattle, which accounts for 29 percent of all farms across the nation (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015a). The overwhelming majority—91 percent—of beef cattle operations in the United States are individually or family operated, making the typical beef cattle producer an owner-producer (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015a).

Collectively, these aforementioned factors depict several of the reasons why I selected cattle production as my commodity of focus.⁵ In summary, the vastness of the

⁴ Examples of supplier consolidation include the mergers of DuPont and Dow Chemical Company as well as Bayer and Monsanto corporations. For further discussion on the effects of these consolidations see Stuart and Houser (2018), Sullivan (2017), and MacDonald (2017).

⁵ An additional reason, discussed at length in the methodological chapter, is my personal biography and familiarity with the cattle industry. I am also familiar with row crop and timber commodities and could

U.S. cattle industry and importance of livestock production to U.S. agriculture are the primary reasons I focused on cattle production. Furthermore, I decided to focus on livestock production because producers within the cattle industry have fewer barriers to entry compared to other crops and higher degrees of control over their farms than other commodity growers. This is an important factor because the use of government farm programs by cattle producers is not mandatory or necessary to be profitable; producers have the choice to participate or not. I argue that these aspects, combined together, are compelling reasons to focus on cattle production when considering questions regarding success in agriculture in the United States.

Federal Agricultural Policy

In the previous sections, I have discussed agricultural and specifically, cattle, production in the United States providing an overview of the industry and basic farming classifications. I also presented a portion of reasoning for focusing explicitly on cattle production rather than a different commodity in this thesis. Because I am studying producers' perspectives on farming and their use of farm programs, it is also necessary to provide an overview of the role of the federal government in cattle production. In the following section, I describe the historical impetuses for agricultural policy. Additionally, because I am specifically interested in how and why producers use farm programs, I outline the types of farm programs available for livestock producers.

have selected either of those groupings to focus on; however, the factors listed in this chapter were the key reasons I opted to pursue a focus on cattle producers rather than row crop or timber producers.

History of USDA and Farm Programs

Although there have been numerous changes in capitalistic agricultural production in the United States since the first European settlers arrived in the early seventeenth century, their common philosophy—low food prices and a stable supply of foodstuffs are paramount for a country’s survival and prosperity—survives mostly unchanged today in U.S. policy (Drache 1996). Even with the growth in the alternative and organic food movement, the vast majority of the federal government’s agricultural policies aim to help farmers be profitable as they work to produce more foodstuffs faster, cheaper, and easier because food security is a cornerstone of current economic and national security (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010; Vilsack 2017). The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the USDA all have key food security and safety programs with the stated aims that Americans have will access to wholesome, reasonably priced food products. While several agencies work on food and agricultural issues, USDA is the main government entity responsible for managing the programs and encouraging agricultural production and conservation.

Because agriculture is place-specific, USDA has 4,500 offices across the United States (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2019). Over time, the agency has worked to streamline programs, reduce administrative staff, and optimize program delivery efficiency with mixed results (Conklin and Gahr 1993; Schaffer, Ray, and Center 2017; U.S. Government Accountability Office 1997, 2014; Vilsack 2017). Even after rounds of consolidation, USDA maintains a county-level presence in the United States and all federal agricultural programs are administered locally through the county offices.

Federal Farm Programs Today: Financial Capital

In 2013, the average U.S. family spent roughly 10.3 percent of their pre-tax income on food (Gabe 2014), which is a decline in income share since the 1960s. Food in the United States has arguably become more affordable for the consumer; however, it is not necessarily always profitable for the producer.

While the proportional cost of food has decreased for the consumer, the amount of farm share, or profit share, for the farmer has also decreased; Schnepf (2013) found that the average farm share of profits has declined roughly 15 percent in the last 60 years. Food is a value-added commodity, meaning a product that is changed in some fashion—such as being repackaged or processed—before it reaches the consumer. The majority of the money spent by consumers on foodstuffs at retail outlets usually does not reach the farmer. The bulk of consumer food expenditures goes to pay for the transportation, labeling, sorting, washing, packaging, storing, marking, and shelving of foodstuffs (Schnepf 2013).

With farmers only receiving 10.8-15.5 cents of each dollar spent in supermarkets and farmers' markets, many individuals do not see the benefit of entering into an industry where one has little control over one's profit share and even less control over the inputs and process of production (Schnepf 2013). The risk of being dependent on unpredictable weather patterns and growing seasons as well as the high start-up costs (land, equipment, other inputs) combined with the promise of small profits are key barriers to entry in agriculture. To provide security for farmers (and hence security for the supply of food), the U.S. Congress provides a wide array of farm support programs through USDA. When producers visit their county offices to participate in farm programs, they seek

financial capital to mitigate risk and boost profits (Shields 2015; U.S. Government Accountability Office 2018).

The Farm Bill

While programs are administered at the county level by USDA, programs are only created at the federal level. The exact formal policies of how the United States aims to achieve an affordable, stable, and safe food supply are decided by the U.S. Congress. Roughly every five years—dependent on the exact political climate—legislators work to produce a farm and food policy bill, commonly known as the “farm bill.” Eighteen farm bills have been passed since the 1930s with the purpose of controlling and monitoring U.S. agricultural production to prevent an oversupply without hindering food security (Johnson and Monke 2018; Stein 2018). The farm bill contains policies on a wide array of programs and practices: commodity programs, conservation, crop insurance, trade, nutrition, food and farm research, farm credit, horticulture, and specialty production practices like organic agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018e).

Previous farm bills remain as laws unless specifically modified or eliminated by future farm bills (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018e). Over time, farm bills have become gigantic pieces of legislation to address the intricacies of specific commodities, the irregularities of previous farm bill programs, and a lengthy list of large and small programs under the farm bill umbrella (Benedict 1953; Johnson and Monke 2018; Nestle 2016). Although still called the “farm bill,” nearly 80 percent of the funding allocations from the most recent farm bill, the Agricultural Act of 2014, are for nutrition programs (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018c). The remaining funding percentages are: crop insurance (8 percent), conservation programs (6 percent), commodity programs (5

percent), and all other programs (1 percent) (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018c). Nevertheless, there were still massive amounts of funding dedicated to farm and conservation programs—roughly \$200 billion—over the 20 year period between 2014-2033 (Congressional Budget Office 2014).

While the funds are awarded slowly over time to thousands of producers, the large amount of funding depicts the federally subsidized nature of U.S. agriculture. Specific programs within the farm bill have differing goals; however, the chief goal of the programs is assisting producers to absorb the risks involved in agricultural production and increase the profitability of working in agriculture. These twin aims increase the probability of America achieving and continuing to achieve the European settlers' goals of having a cheap, stable food supply.

Federal Farm Programs for Livestock Producers

For this thesis, I focus only on cattle production. Overall, livestock producers are eligible for fewer farm programs than other commodities. Unlike commodities that are less hardy and more dependent on natural inputs (rain, adequate temperatures, etc.), inputs in cattle production are more predictable. In comparison to perishable commodities like fruits, vegetables, and dairy products, there is a more variable commodity time to market window in cattle production. Hence, the more flexible means of production, the fewer barriers to entry, and the overall weaker structure of the cattle lobby in comparison to other commodities result in fewer farm programs (Gardner 2002).

The most common farm programs that livestock producers use are conservation programs, disaster assistance programs, and farm loans. These three types of programs are administered by either the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) or the

Farm Service Agency (FSA). Both the NRCS and the FSA are sub-agencies of the USDA with their own organizational structures.

Applying for Programs with NRCS or FSA

Like other USDA sub-agencies, NRCS is decentralized. Program priorities are decided at a national level and fashioned into a strategic plan (e.g. see U.S. Department of Agriculture 2011); however, the majority of administrative and programmatic funding decisions are decided on a regional or state level (Jackson Lewis LLP Corporate Diversity Counseling Group 2011; Stubbs 2018). At USDA's headquarters in Washington, D.C., the Chief Conservationist acts as the director of NRCS and oversees four Regional Conservationists (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2013). Each state, in turn, has their own State Conservationist who reports directly to the Regional Conservationists. The State Conservationist serves as the chief administrative officer within each state and supervises each county's Area Conservationist and the sub-state regional District Conservationists (Jackson Lewis LLP Corporate Diversity Counseling Group 2011; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018a).

NRCS has field offices in most counties across the United States. To apply for a NRCS program (other than CRP, which is managed by the Farm Service Agency), land owners contact their Area Conservationist and alert him or her to their interest in conservation (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015b). The producer then meets with the area conservationist, files the respective paperwork, and the Area Conservationist then informs the land owner of her or his options regarding funding, programs, and a timeline (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015b). Applications are accepted at any time during the year; however, funding decisions are made according to local deadlines (U.S.

Department of Agriculture 2018d). Local Area Conservationists then score and rank applications before submitting them to the State Conservationist for approval (Jackson Lewis LLP Corporate Diversity Counseling Group 2011).

The FSA has a similar structure as NRCS and they are often co-located in the same office (U.S. Government Accountability Office 1998). The FSA Administrator oversees FSA programs nationally, and each state has a State Administrator to direct policy and program implementation (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018f). Local county offices are managed by the County Executive Director (CED) and policies are implemented by the Farm County Committee (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2018f). Applying for FSA programs follows the same trajectory as NRCS programs; producers must first come into their local FSA office and inquire about programs. After working with either the County Executive Director or a loan officer, the producer begins the application process.

Unfortunately, NRCS and FSA have a problematic history with local policy and program implementation (Daniel 2013; Jackson Lewis LLP Corporate Diversity Counseling Group 2011). While both USDA agencies announce that they are equal opportunity providers, neither has a good history of equitable management of farm programs (Daniel 2013; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Reynolds 2002). Historically, people of color and women have had significant difficulties applying for government farm programs and USDA was subject to several multi-billion dollar settlements regarding their unfair treatment of women and individuals of color (Copeland 2015; Cowan and Feder 2013)

Summary: Federal Farm Programs

To farm in the United States, an individual needs an abundance of financial capital (Gardner 2002; Johnson and Monke 2018). A modern commercial cattle farmer—one who is focused on producing livestock for sale—cannot farm without financial capital, because money is necessary for input costs, land to house the livestock, the livestock itself, and feed and hay for the livestock. Financial capital is also necessary to transport cattle once producers are ready to market their animals. Access to financial capital is a necessity enter and sustain agricultural production; therefore, financial capital is necessary for success (Gardner 2002).

To stabilize agricultural prices and help producers mitigate risk with an infusion of financial capital, the United States has an array of farm programs for producers. In addition to helping the farming be more financially successful in her or his operation, farm programs promote food security and help to keep food prices suppressed (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010; Wilde 2013). The effect of the policies are viewed as a net positive by the general public and farmers—there are cheap foodstuffs for consumers and stable incomes for producers (Wuthnow 2015).

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

My aim in this chapter is to explore previous scholarship on how white rural farmers navigate various structures in their everyday life and how they make choices and resolve paradoxes with competing ideologies. The focal contradiction in this thesis is how the producers all believe themselves to be an independent and self-sufficient “good farmer,” yet make diverse choices in their farming operations supported by differing ideologies of success.

As a review of relevant literature, this chapter provides a summary of existing research relating to ideologies and success in agriculture, as well as an overview of existing gaps in the literature. I begin by defining ideology and outlining specifically the ideology of the American Dream. Next, I move to discussions of rural masculinities and rural whiteness. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the relationships between place and interaction with the government.

The Ideology of the American Dream

Ideologies “provide frameworks for understanding our social existence, providing a way of making sense of the world” (Lewis 2004:632). As Stuart Hall (1984:7) writes, “...in any society we all constantly make use of a whole set of frameworks of interpretation and understanding, often in a very practical unconscious way, and that those things alone enable us to make sense of what is going on around us, what our

position is, and what we are likely to do.” In this sense, ideologies offer “common-sense,” taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world works.

Ideologies emerge out of struggles for status and position and are learned socially through dominant narratives about how society works (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Gramsci 1971; Lewis 2017). As such, individuals or institutions in positions of authority often influence the promotion or stifling of particular ideologies (Williams 1977). Therefore, certain ideologies are more pervasive and dominant than others. However, dominant ideologies are not necessarily the reality; they are instead interpretations of the dominant groups’ experiences and interests (Jackman 1994).

At their core, ideologies are political tools used to provide the “rules” in society, making certain actions and behaviors appear as if they happen “naturally” (Bonilla-Silva 2018). As such, dominant ideologies often serve to perpetuate the status quo or even justify forms of oppression and inequality. Because ideologies are often taken-for-granted, “common-sense” ways of interpreting the social world, dominant ideological positions are rarely questioned. However, ideologies can be refashioned or reworked, and ideologies can even compete or overlap with each other (Hall 1984; Hochschild 1995).

The American Dream is a powerful ideology in the United States (Cullen 2004; Hauhart 2015). This ideology shapes the construction of the American “national identity,” and the “true” American self (Bellah et al. 1996). Scholars call the American Dream the central, national creed of the United States (Cullen 2004; Hauhart 2015; Johnson 2015). Rank et al. (2014:1) describes the American Dream as “a road map for the way we often envision the course of our lives. The rules of the game are well-known,

as is the bargain that is struck.” The dream “frames perspectives, decisions, and experiences” (Johnson 2015:28).

Tenets of the American Dream

The American Dream is composed of three ever-present tenets: meritocracy, equal opportunity, and individualism (Hochschild 1995; Johnson 2015; McNamee 2018; Rank et al. 2014). Without each of the three, the ideology would not be “the American Dream” because it is the compilation of the three tenets together that creates and sustains the dream. Hope of progress, while not a central tenet, is almost always also present in the ideology, as well (Rank et al. 2014).

Meritocracy is “getting out of the system what you put into it” (McNamee 2018:1). The premise is that the United States is a society where “individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities” (McNamee 2018:2). The belief in meritocracy is the core of the American Dream, the logic of how it is supposed to function (Johnson 2015). Americans tend to overestimate the strength of characteristics associated with individual merit such as hard work, moral character, and talent, and underestimate the strength of nonmerit factors like family wealth, social and cultural capital, and luck (Hochschild 1995; Johnson 2015; McNamee 2018).

The second tenet, equal opportunity, concerns social mobility. Equal opportunity is the idea that anyone, regardless of their rank or status in society, has an equal opportunity to climb the ladder of social and economic mobility (Johnson 2015; McNamee 2018). The American Dream is appealing because of the promise of equal opportunity. The belief that anyone can succeed flourishes when combined with the belief of merit-based success and the United States’ promise of equal opportunity through

the school system and other government programs. It provides the necessary hope and motivation for people to labor for success (Rank et al. 2014).

Individualism, the final tenet, is “the first language in which Americans tend to think about their lives [and] values independence and self-reliance. These qualities are expected to win the rewards of success in a competitive society” (Bellah et al. 1996:xiv). Individualism in the United States has *religious, political, economic, and cultural* roots that fashion Americans’ understandings of success (McNamee 2018). The American Protestant work ethic was the precursor to modern American’s understanding of “work ethic.” Success, in their religious doctrine, meant that individuals accumulated wealth through work and their specific work ethic. Today, the religious influence of the Protestant work ethic is still seen in the emphasis on individualism in the American Dream as economic prosperity is the chief marker of success in the American Dream (Hochschild 1995; Rank et al. 2014).

Politically, individualism in the United States is rooted in the principles of the American Revolution (McNamee 2018). With the abolishment of ties to a monarchy and the feudal society’s method of categorizing people, the founders of the United States placed a strong emphasis on the individual and his own individual power within the political system after the American Revolution. Hierarchies, in theory, are not supposed to exist in the American social and political system. The importance is placed on the individual and her or his will to succeed.

The new American political system without ties to a monarchy enabled a new economic system due to the availability of land for individual ownership. Unlike in feudal societies, American land could be owned by specific individuals enabling an

entrepreneurial, free-market economy built on the ideas of Adam Smith. Like the popular Protestant doctrine of success predicated on work ethic and a political system built on the ideas of independence and freedom, the economic system also enabled the development of American individualism (McNamee 2018).

Lastly, the American idea of individualism has cultural roots in frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner (McNamee 2018). The original frontier myth promoted the ideal of the individual conquering the frontier and creating her or his own success through the domination of the great frontier. This picture of individualism is idealized and depicted as both the cowboy and yeoman farmer (Bellah et al. 1996).

Collectively, the three tenets of the American Dream—meritocracy, equal opportunity, and individualism—provide its allure. The political, cultural, social, and religious roots of individualism in the United States provide a robust setting for an ideology centered on individual work and success. Success is achievable, according to the American Dream, due to anyone’s ability to use their individual work ethic, morals, and talents to pursue success and betterment. While providing a hearty amount of hope to people as an ideology, the American Dream also serves to justify and explain inequality (Hochschild 1995; Johnson 2015). In a capitalistic society, the American Dream provides “natural” explanations of failure that center on individuals’ purported lack of character, talent, or work ethic.

(Financial) Success and the American Dream

James Truslow Adams (1931) coined the phrase “the American Dream” in his work *The Epic of America*. He described the American Dream as economic and personal fulfillment. Nearly a century later, the American Dream is viewed as economic, social,

and relational *success* (Bellah et al. 1996). Americans' self-images are built upon the concept and valuation of success (Hochschild 1995). Although the American Dream encompasses more than economic success, the metric for achieving success (and the American Dream) is financial (Hochschild 1995; Rank et al. 2014).

Bellah et al. (1996:xiv) places specific emphasis on the economics of success as in describing the importance of the American Dream: "We are divided, we are told, by race, by culture, by creed, by differing views of the national identity. But we are united, as it turns out, in at least one core belief, even across lines of color, religion, region, and occupation: the belief that economic success or misfortune is the individual's responsibility, and hers or his alone." Economic security and success, in this ideology, is built upon individual merit (hard work) via opportunity.

Therefore, success is related to virtue because to Americans "virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue...." (Hochschild 1995:23). This relationship between virtue and success of the individual draws from the Protestant work ethic and the foundations of American individualism. Moral worth is attributed to those that are able to provide for themselves rather than accepting something from a government entity (Sherman 2009).

The American Dream, then, is about accumulation of both economic success *and* moral worth. Economic success is proof of an individual's level of virtue, according to the ideology. Hence, one can accumulate moral standing and economic worth at the same time. But, as Sherman (2009) demonstrates and as I discuss in detail later in this chapter, individuals can fail to achieve economic success, yet due to the way they fail,

succeed at the American Dream in terms of virtue because of their choices concerning their interaction or lack of interaction with the government.

Farming and the American Dream

The American farmer stereotype—rugged, individualistic, hard-working, moral—is based in the ideals of the yeoman farmer found in Thomas Jefferson’s writings (Koch and Peden 2004; U.S. Department of Agriculture 1937). Through popular and political culture, Jefferson’s yeoman farmer became the idealized version of the achievement of the American Dream (Dorsey 1995; Freitag 2013; Jillson 2004; Peterson 1990).

Although the imagery is changing in today’s society as fewer Americans work in agriculture, farming has a strong historical relationship with the imagery of the American Dream, individualism, and success (Wuthnow 2015).

While there is a strong cultural association between farming and the American Dream, little research exists on how farmers in the Twenty-First Century understand this ideology. In one of the few qualitative studies of farming that peripherally examine success and the American Dream, Wuthnow (2015) found that of three tenets of the American Dream, farmers rarely emphasize equal opportunity; they instead often focus on individualism, virtue, and hard work. In doing so, farmers talk about independence as being able to set their own schedules daily, making decisions without needing to consult supervisors, and having skills that enable them to be self-reliant. Independence, then, is less of an orientation towards others as much as it is a relationship with self. Similarly, for farmers, their view of meritocracy has less of an emphasis on merit and innate talent; rather, it is a view of hard work and morality (Wuthnow 2015).

Further qualitative research is necessary to better understand farmers' understandings of the American Dream. Wuthnow's (2015) work, while a meticulously written cultural piece, fails to acknowledge the interaction of gender and race in farmers' understandings of success and the American Dream. And outside of Wuthnow's *In the Blood*, there are few other current studies of white farmers' perspectives on farming specifically considering the interaction of race and gender. This follows a larger trend in lack of studies on agricultural producers (Campbell et al. 2006; Lobao and Meyer 2001).

Place, Morality, and the American Dream

Place is paramount because it is a lens that people use to interpret society and their place within it (Cramer 2016; Gray 2009). In *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Katherine Cramer (2016) studied white, rural Wisconsin and voting behavior.⁶ She created a concept—rural consciousness—to describe how “an identity as a rural person...includes much more than an attachment to place. It includes a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources as well as a sense that rural folks fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and work ethic” (Cramer 2016:5–6). According to Cramer (2016), rural residents believe they have their own values, are largely ignored by policymakers, and that they receive less than they rightly deserve.

⁶ Although I do not aim to center whiteness in this thesis, I predominantly discuss literature on whites in rural spaces because of my focus on white cattle producers. This is not to say that rural is or should be equated with white. For a critical assessment of the void of literature on black rural experiences and need for scholarly attention to black rural communities, see Chakraborti and Garland (2013)

The white rural middle class, then, is something different than white middle class in other spaces (Cramer 2016; Wuthnow 2018). Just as rural is viewed in tension with urban, rural residents often juxtapose their own place-based identities against that of individuals who live in the city or the suburbs. This occurs even as the material divisions between rural and urban are not as tangible as individuals believe (Bell 2007; Cronon 1991; Halfacree 2006). Nevertheless, rural residents view themselves as wholesome while depicting others as dirty, vulgar, and violent (the city) or wimpy (the suburbs) (Desmond 2007). Rural individuals' use of these conceptualizations help to perpetuate and recreate the urban/rural divide (Desmond 2007; Leap 2017).

There are also regional place-based dichotomies—the north versus the south. Conducting an ethnography in southern Louisiana, Arlie Hochschild (2016:215) found that white southerners believe that their home region receives less funding and assistance than the North. The North, in their view, cripples the American Dream by supporting individuals who are “cutting” in line. Their ideas of who “cuts” in line are often gendered and racialized (Brown 2013; Hochschild 2016; Quadagno 1994). With economic options of differentiation and identity construction exhausted, many—but not all—white middle class southerners now build their identity upon the ideals of pride in work, region, family values, religiosity, and sacrifice (Hochschild 2016). Again, like Cramer (2016) and Desmond (2007), Hochschild (2016) found that tensions over economic differences were rephrased as differentiations over values, morality, and work ethic.

Scholars have also found that values and understandings of morality are closely tied with understandings of place (Hochschild 2016; Lamont 2000; Macgregor 2010;

Sherman 2009; Wuthnow 2018). Morality is a form of symbolic capital (Lamont 2000; Sherman 2009). It can be used to create boundaries and serve as a justification of choices. Moral worth is often constructed through work habits in rural spaces, even if the habits are counterintuitive (Scott 2010b; Sherman 2009).

In Sherman's (2009) ethnography of rural Northern California residents, she found that during periods of economic instability moral capital can be used to accrue other types of capital. Because of moral capital's strong association with work—based in the ideology of the achievement of the American Dream through hard work and merit—rural residents are often reluctant to accept government assistance because it is not something accrued through work (Sherman 2009). Interacting with an institution lessens an individual's moral capital, whereas exhibiting the ideals of the American Dream prove an individual's worthiness of success even if he or she fails to achieve economic prosperity.

The “Good” White Farmer

Rural occupations, such as farming and mining, are associated with virtue and hard work, and they are considered “legitimate” occupations in society (Campbell et al. 2006; Lobao 2006). There is a strong relationship between morality and work within rural communities, and an even stronger relationship between honor, work, and traditional rural farming occupations (Campbell et al. 2006; Kimmel 1996). These ideals stem from the policies and writings of former presidents, the influence of popular culture, the long effects of the frontier myth, and the emphasis placed on the importance of farming and its association with the American Dream (Cullen 2004; Kimmel 1996; U.S. Department of Agriculture 1937).

The good farmer is a moral person. The “good farmer” is defined as farmers choose specific farming activities—with differing moral values—to differentiate themselves from other farmers (Benson 2011; Roesch-McNally, Arbuckle, and Tyndall 2018; Strand, Arnould, and Press 2014). Much of this concerns the choices that producers make on their farms and how those choices are viewed by other producers. Farmers compare their farming decisions through conversation and through visual evaluation of other producers’ farms and crops/commodities. “Roadside farming”—driving down the road and viewing someone else’s farm—is the practice of farmers comparing each other’s farming practices and choices (Burton 2004). This practice is a means of farmers monitoring each other and differentiating themselves from one another through the material world and values based choices rooted in local definitions of morality. Because farmer is often default for “man,” there are a growing number of studies of masculinities and farming practices. The following section explores current research on rural masculinity and its interconnections to farming and the American Dream.

White Rural Masculinities

Masculinity, and more specifically, white masculinity and white rural masculinity, has long been the idealized norm in the United States (Campbell et al. 2006). Long “hidden” from view, the socially constructed, historical context dependent nature of masculinity has slowly garnered scholarly and public attention in recent decades (Messerschmidt 2018). Today, there is a burgeoning field of study on masculinities and an increasing number of scholars studying the masculine rural. In the following

paragraphs, I sum recent research on white rural masculinities and provide examples of scholars studying the intersection of values, farming, and masculinity.

Just as there is no single rural, there is no one masculinity. There are instead different practices and representations of masculinity, creating multiple masculinities (Campbell et al. 2006; Connell 2005; Peter et al. 2006). Masculinities are fashioned locally in specific places; however, their creation is in response to global economic, social, and political transformations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2018). The valuation of each masculinity occurs on different scales in differing places; each individual geography has its own hierarchy of masculinities (Campbell et al. 2006; Connell 2005). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the idealized, privileged version of masculinity in a particular setting; it obscures other masculinities to make them less salient and powerful and reproduces gender inequalities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2018). Dominant masculinities are those that are powerful and common in a particular setting; however, they do not legitimate gender inequalities (Beasley 2008; Filteau 2015; Messerschmidt 2018). The interactions of differing dominant masculinities and power structures form hegemonic masculinities, and there is no single hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Messerschmidt 2018). Hence, the study of masculinities necessitates understanding the spatial, racial, and contextual factors that empower and inhibit particular masculinities (Campbell and Bell 2000; Connell 2005).

Campbell et al. (2006:3) describe rural masculinity as “not only a relational ideology, but also a relational set of social practices.” Lobao (2006) further explains that rural men are constantly in the process of refashioning rural masculinities because their actions are shaped and limited by their surrounding economic, social, and geographical

setting. Additionally, it is important to recognize that not all men have the same access to doing certain means of masculinities (Connell 2005; Leap 2018). Therefore, the tools and symbols that men use to do masculinities change in response to the economy, institutions, and contextual, individual circumstances (Carlson 2015).

Just as work ethic, morality, independence, and success are strongly associated with the ideology of the American Dream and understandings of place based values and their relationship to work, those values—work ethic, morality, and success—are also strongly associated with rural masculinity. The farmer is the most celebrated image of the rural masculine (Barlett 2006; Lobao 2006). Campbell and Bell (2000) argue that there is not one “rural masculinity”; instead conceptualize two distinct manners of studying this intersection—the masculine in the rural (masculine rural) and the rural in the masculine (rural masculine). Campbell and Bell (2000:540) define masculine rural as, “the various ways in which masculinity is constructed within what rural social scientists would recognize as rural spaces and sites” The rural masculine is “the way in which notions of rurality help constitute notions of masculinity” (Campbell and Bell 2000:540). Campbell and Bell (2000) argue that masculinity is intertwined with conceptualizations of rurality, and to adequately address power in rural spaces, the researcher must examine gender, power, and place together.⁷

Studying the masculine rural encompasses exploring how masculine practice(s) happen in daily life in rural places (Campbell et al. 2006). Understanding masculinity in

⁷ While the majority of literature on rural masculinities explores the intersections of gender, place, and power, race is left less explored. Barlett (2006) suggests that additional contemporary research is needed on the intersection of work occupation, place, gender, and race because while there are a growing number of studies of black masculinities, few address the complexities of place, work occupation, gender and race collectively. For historical discussion of these issues, see Hine and Jenkins (1999a, 1999b).

daily life provides a better understanding of how differing representations and practices of masculinity emerge and shape everyday interaction as well as how it makes decisions and actions appear natural and instinctive (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Several scholars have studied the relationship between white rural masculinities and “good farming” practices, devising explanations for the variances observed in how farmers approach their daily farming operations. Describing white plains farmers, McNall and McNall (1983) conclude that there are two farming ethics: the business and the family. Salamon (1992) described farmers as either “yeomen” or “entrepreneurs” and found that farmers tended to differ by white ethnicity. The most recent, Barlett (2006), found that there are two value system conceptualizations that divide white farmers: agrarian values or industrial values. Barlett (2006) stresses that agrarian values are family and land centered, whereas industrial values emphasize financial success. Each dichotomy presented by the aforementioned scholars is similar to Kimmel’s (1996) heroic artisan (success within the household unit) and self-made man (success made outside of the household unit) divisions as McNall and McNall, Salamon, and Barlett all denote the variance of farming success in regards to the how the farmer views his family and the role of women in the household.

While previous research on farming and masculine definitions of achievement and the American Dream have closely examined patriarchy and household relationships, less attention has been given to commodity and occupational differences and race. The farmers interviewed for Barlett’s (2006) study of Georgia farmers, Salamon’s (1992) ethnography with central plains farmers, McNall and McNall’s (1983) textbook using interviews with plains farmers, and even Wuthnow’s (2015) cultural analysis of

interviews with American farmers all only use data from white full-time farmers that predominantly farm only grain crops. As previously mentioned, row crop agriculture is significantly different from livestock production. Even though there might be similarities, we cannot assume that white masculinities function in the same manner for producers of a different, very technology dependent commodity who work in farming full time versus those that have an off-farm job in addition to their farm and raise livestock.

Whiteness

Race is “a fundamental concept that has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, and economic structure, and culture of the United States” (Omi and Winant 2015:106). The boundary lines and meaning of race are socially constructed for political purposes and are “historically fluid” (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Omi and Winant 2015:x). As Jung and Almaguer (2000:73) state, “race is nothing more than what society and law say it is.” However, race is not simply an illusion—it is very much real in its consequences, which is why it is necessary to interrogate critically (Almaguer 2008; Omi and Winant 2015).

Race and racism, once thought to only matter at the individual and cognitive levels, can only be considered, examined, and understood in regards to social structure (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Omi and Winant 2015:215). A racial structure is “*the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*” (Bonilla-Silva 2018:9). Racial structures exist to benefit the dominant race and there are material aspects of placement within the racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Members of the dominant race work to maintain and reproduce their place within the racial hierarchy because of the advantages of higher group position (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999). Consequently, the

central purpose of studying racial structures is examining the “social, economic, political, social control, and ideological mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society” (Bonilla-Silva 2018:9). Where racial privilege exists and persists, there is also racial inequality.

Racial inequality exists and persists in the U.S. due, in part, to the racial ideologies that uphold the racial structure of the U.S. (Bonilla Silva 2018). Racial privilege and inequality are accepted by people as natural due to the nature of racial ideologies. Racial ideology, in particular, is best defined as “*the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo*” (Bonilla-Silva 2018:9). Racial ideologies are produced by various mechanisms and processes as well as on varying levels. The strength and “power of ideologies lies in their ability to facilitate collective domination in a way such that they often make vast inequalities understandable and acceptable to those at both the top and the bottom of the social order” (Lewis 2017:32).

In the United States, race shapes every aspect of society; it impacts interactions with people and institutions, forms the understanding of self, and access to differing types of capital (Du Bois 1903; Lewis 2004:629). To understand exactly how race and racism function in the United States today, Lewis (2004:637) argues that we must, in part, examine and recognize “the roles of whites as racial actors and the shifting contours of whiteness.” This is difficult because of the pervasiveness of color-blind ideology and whites’ lack of a strong racial consciousness. Lewis (2004) stresses that whites’ racialness needs to be given the same attention as racial minorities for numerous reasons, but the chief reason being whites’ role in racialized social system and their racialized

social location. Specifically, Lewis (2004) calls for study of the groupness or the social collective of whites using qualitative methods.⁸

McDermott (2006:147) demonstrates how “the meanings attached to white racial identity are not fixed, but context dependent,” yet “regardless of the experience of whiteness, each understanding of white racial identity stems from an overarching racial hierarchy in which whites are dominant and nonwhites subordinate” (McDermott 2006:55). Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006:232) explain that “white identity is a significant social category by which individuals are given preferential treatment in reward allocation and benefit of the doubt in drawing inferences about traits and actions over out-group members.” Like masculinity, white identity is considered the norm and natural; hence, it is often overlooked and less unexplored when considering identity or designing sociological research (Brekhus 1998; Carbado 2013; Lewis 2004). Hegemonic whiteness, again similar in theory to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, functions because “different hegemonic ideals are collectively shared by members and function as seemingly neutral yardsticks against which cultural behavior, norms, and values are measured” (Hughey 2010:1292).

Characteristics of white racial identity include that white identities are not visible and taken for granted as well as how the importance of whiteness is dependent on the situation (McDermott and Samson 2005). There is an immense amount of privilege connected to whiteness because whites regularly do not have to take notice of race and its role in their lives; consequently, whites often do not view themselves as having “race”

⁸ This thesis is not about centering whiteness. Lewis (2004:642) cautions against centering whiteness and explains that any research on whiteness should not be done “because it is hip, not because whites have been left out, but because doing so is a necessary step in confronting the continuing reality of racial inequality.”

(Lewis 2004). The denial of white privilege is the basis of color-blind racism, which is a dominant racial ideology (Lewis 2004; McDermott and Samson 2005).

A key contribution of recent whiteness studies is the increased acknowledgment of white hegemony (Scott 2010a). Today, the focus in whiteness studies is on the geographic, local context—how whiteness is changing and how specific white identities are unique (Scott 2010a; Steyn and Conway 2010). Racial understandings are formed by specific ideals, cultures, and traditions—all of which are deeply connected to place (Feagin and O’Brien 2003; McDermott and Samson 2005).

In research on rural farmers, there are several studies of white ethnicities (e.g., see Salamon 1992; Wuthnow 2015) but only limited additional attention racial power and whiteness. Just as rural is understood as a racially homogenous category, farmers are assumed to be a monolithic group as well: white and male. Hence, while many studies of farmers have data on white farmers, the farmers’ white racial identity is not acknowledged or critically considered in the research (e.g., Stuart and Houser 2018). Consequently, discussions of the farmers’ use of various resources (or lack of them) or their networks often fail to account for how their position as white in the U.S. racial hierarchy shapes their interactions with institutions, networks, and access to differing types of capital. As such, it is important to draw upon critical sociological theories of whiteness and racism when considering how farmers make sense of, or think ideologically about, the world around them. In doing so, this work would add to the growing body of literature on whiteness in rural places and the existing literature on perspectives of farmers of color (e.g., see Balvanz et al. 2016; Bowens 2015; Gilbert et al. 2002; Gordon, Barton, and Adams 2013; Quisumbing King et al. 2018) and racial

hierarchies in agriculture (e.g., see Daniel 2013; Domosh 2015; Knobloch 1996; Roediger and Esch 2012; Van Sant 2018).

Interacting with Institutions

For this thesis, I am particularly interested in the paradox of how and why white rural farmers participate in government programs while also explaining to others that they are completely independent and self-sufficient. To explore the tension requires an understanding of how white rural individuals interact with the government. In this section, I provide an overview of current research on white rural individuals and their orientations towards government.

This area of research—the relationship of white rural residents and the government—is a popular topic of inquiry due to the recent rise of conservatism in the United States and the election of President Trump (Ashwood 2018b). There are significant debates in and outside the field of sociology on the accuracy of recent scholarly works on explanations of the current political ideologies for white, rural residents (e.g., Ashwood 2018b; Kelly and Lobao 2018; Perrin 2018); nevertheless, recent attention on white, rural residents has yielded rich scholarship on rural residents' orientations towards the government. Therefore, because I am not specifically studying political ideologies and attempting to explain voting behavior or political identification, I am using findings from an array of recent scholarly works on white rural residents and government.

Before exploring white rural residents' orientations towards government, it is important to first acknowledge and examine the converse—the orientation of government towards space and those that live in those spaces. One of the primary functions of the

government in the United States is to manage and protect land rights. From tax policy to the military, many U.S. laws and informal policies concern the use, sale, or protection of particular geographical places. To better manage these policies, borders and boundary lines were socially constructed and those created lines now have political, economic, and social consequences (Dolhinow 2010; Voyles 2015). Policymakers and bureaucrats also created classification systems—like “rural” and “urban” and then reified the demarcating lines in policy.

Over time, the United States has had a contradictory and changing relationship to the view of rural spaces (Lichter and Brown 2011). Rural is heralded as the idyllic ideal; however, rural places are also used as sacrifice zones—supposedly undesirable places with less economic, political, and social worth and therefore acceptable places for natural resource and economic exploitation (Scott 2010b). Rural residents respond to these tensions by drawing on collective identity and social solidarity (Leap and Thompson 2018). The stereotypes of rural as backward, uneducated, and full of dying communities persist in tandem with idealization of the stereotypical rural ideal of white picket fences and small, rural family landownership. Rural is seen as both worth saving and in need of saving at the same time (Bell 2007).

For government officials, the “saving” occurs primarily through jobs and government programs. Jobs and economic activity in rural areas are meant to be means to help bring rural areas out of persistent poverty as rural places have much higher rates of persistent poverty than urban areas (Thiede, Kim, and Valasik 2018). The creation of new jobs is in turn supported by government laws and policies; however, these jobs are often in exploitative industries (Ashwood 2018b, 2018a; Scott 2010b). While there are

numerous positive rural policy initiatives and programs, the federal government often enables the exploitation of rural areas through existing policy and its formal and informal representations of rural. Notwithstanding the *representations* of rural as the American ideal, cities and urban areas are the heart of government power and policymaking (Lichter and Brown 2011; Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007).

The urban/rural power divide and the exploitation of rural areas have strong impacts on rural individuals that shape their orientations to the government. Additionally, individuals' orientations are also formed by the constructions of their own identities, shaped by race, gender, class, occupation, and place. Literature on white individuals living in rural places in the United States shows that they believe that city dwellers do not understand their values or share their views of hard work and feel disrespected by the government (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Leap 2017; Wuthnow 2018).⁹ "Animosity toward the government," according to Cramer (2016:40) is "partly about feeling overlooked, ignored." Rural residents believe that city dwellers receive more than their share of government resources and tax money, while rural residents see their communities decline as they continue to pay taxes (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016). For many, to be rural is to be self-sufficient and uphold traditional values (Sherman 2009).

⁹ Wuthnow (2018) and others have criticized Hochschild's (2016) *Strangers in Their Own Land* as not being an ethnographical study of rural individuals because she lived in metropolitan area (Lake Charles, Louisiana) and interviewed individuals living and working in "non-rural" areas as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Lake Charles is not a small, rural town; however, many of the small areas outside of it where Hochschild conducted fieldwork are rural places. Rural includes much more than population (Bell 2007; Halfacree 2006); hence I argue that Hochschild's work captures white rural individuals' perspectives because she spent significant time in and around rural areas with rural residents in addition to her time in Lake Charles.

Rural residents often share that they are “misunderstood” by outsiders, and rural men feel particularly misunderstood by the non-rural public and those in positions of power within the government (Ashwood 2018a; Farough 2006; Hochschild 2016; Wuthnow 2015). Rural scholars argue, however, over how rural residents are misunderstood—especially over “rural” political values (Ashwood 2018b). These fundamental disagreements over the meanings of rural individuals’ political ideologies and affinities further complicates the already hazy picture of the relationship between rurality, conservatism, and political orientation.

While several scholars have analyzed the issue from a political philosophy standpoint, focusing on conservatism, neoliberalism, and right-wing politics, Loka Ashwood (2018b) argues for scholars to broaden their foci when examining the complexities of understanding the interrelationship of rural, politics, and government (the state). Ashwood (2018b) summarizes that rural areas often combine multiple positions: pro-state moral traditions, stateless conceptions of the economy and welfare, and anti-state language. These varying positions are often summed as “conservative” ideologies that guide rural principles, but Ashwood argues that the simple “conservative” and “liberal” labels are not sufficient. Instead, discussions on ideologies should, according to Ashwood (2018b), consider broader political philosophies that draw from anarchy as rural areas draw from rich histories of agrarian traditions rooted in anarchical legacies. From Ashwood’s (2018a, 2018a) argument, what is important for this thesis is the acknowledgment that rural does not mean conservatism, government intervention is not always positive, and exploration of political orientations (and the resulting orientations toward government) of rural individuals is complex.

As alluded to by Ashwood (2018a) in her mentioning of pro-state moral traditions and stateless welfare positions, and as I mentioned in a previous section of this chapter, accepting government assistance is often stigmatized as it does not align with rural community values rooted in the morality of work (Sherman 2009). Work has strong, symbolic value in rural communities; accepting any type of assistance from the government is viewed as “cutting in line” (Hochschild 2016; Sherman 2009). Not all assistance is stigmatized, but conceptualizations of stigmatized assistance vary (Cramer 2016). For example, Cramer (2016) explains that tax breaks due to owning a home or having a financial loss on a farm are acceptable, whereas traditional welfare programs such as Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) or Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) programs are not. There are clearly gendered and racialized lines of what social welfare policies are moral and which are not; the policies that benefit whites the most (e.g., home ownership tax breaks or farm programs) are viewed as moral and positive, whereas programs (e.g., SNAP and WIC) that are *perceived* to largely benefit individuals of color—and particular women of color—are viewed as problematic (Katznelson 2005; Quadagno 1994). These gendered and racialized conceptions of worth in association with social welfare policies shape rural residents’ perceptions of what is “welfare” versus a simply a “government program” (Brown 2013; Cramer 2016; Fitzgerald 2014; Quadagno 1994).

In conclusion, understandings of rural individuals’ orientations to government should then first acknowledge that the government has a paradoxical relationship to rural spaces. Secondly, rural individuals’ orientations to the government are shaped by their own position in structural hierarchies. Third, rural individuals’ views of the government

are shaped by their experiences of the urban/rural divide in regards to power and policymaking. Fourth, due to the historic agrarian tradition of anarchy and religious leanings of the majority of rural areas, many rural residents are predisposed to have anti-state political, protestant work-ethic tendencies that result in citizens focused on individual work and less inclined to desire collective governance. Finally, there is significant moral capital—due to importance of the American Dream ideology and rural importance of individualism and hard work—available to rural individuals who eschew any type of interaction with the government.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the methodology used in this research study to answer my research question: “Why do Mississippi farmers pursue (or not pursue) government farm programs?” Below, I detail the research setting, how I selected methods, participants, and sampling technique, and outline the data collection and data analyses process. Lastly, I also reflect on my positionality as a researcher.

Setting

This research was conducted in Mississippi. The mention of Mississippi generates varied images—both positive and negative. Brown (2017:902) explains that “scholars have argued that whatever it means to be southern, Mississippi is it.” Mississippi is often equated with rurality, racism, agriculture, poverty, southern cuisine, and the birthplace of America’s music (Brown 2017; Grim 2017; Ownby 1999; Wolfe 2017).

One out of every two Mississippians lives outside of an incorporated township or in a town with a population of fewer than 200 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Using the U.S. Census Bureau definition, Mississippi is a rural state. Drawing on Bell (2007), Halfacree (2006), and Lichter and Brown (2011), Mississippi is also a rural state in its representations and locality (Ownby 1999).

Although rural does not equate agriculture, in Mississippi agriculture almost entirely occurs in rural spaces. With the exception of small scale school and community gardens, Mississippi's agriculture production is in rural areas. Over one third of the state's acreage is in active farmland (Farm Information Center 2018; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014c). As a whole, the agriculture industry employs 29 percent of the state's workforce and produces 22 percent of the state's income (Mississippi Department of Agriculture 2018; Mississippi State University 2018).

Unlike the majority of states that produce only a small number of commodities, Mississippi's agricultural production spans across multiple commodities. Mississippi is in the Mississippi Portal and Southern Seaboard farm resource regions (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2000). These two regions are known for having higher proportions of small and large farms than other regions and primarily produce cotton, rice, livestock, and poultry (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2000). Mississippi ranks in the top 20 producing states for 15 commodities (Mississippi State University 2017). Consequently, Mississippi's agricultural industry is extremely diverse and no one commodity dominates policymaking, research funding, or organizational activities. I argue that it is important to explore beef cattle producers' experiences in an environment like Mississippi where producers are neither a dominant nor minority commodity producer.

According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, there are 36,700 farms in Mississippi (Mississippi State University 2018). Of those 36,700 farms, 15,940—43.4 percent—are cattle operations (Mississippi State University 2018). The large number of cattle producers, yet the lack of dominance of the industry unlike other states—was a second reason that I selected to study cattle producers' perspectives in Mississippi. In

2017, Mississippi had nearly 900,000 head of cattle inventory, accounting for \$285 million dollar value of production (Mississippi State University 2018). In Mississippi, cattle production occurs in all regions of the state (Mississippi State University 2018). This led to my third reason for collecting data in Mississippi: my ability to collect data from across various geographic regions within a single state.

Lastly, I selected Mississippi as a research site due to my ability to access the cattle production network within this state. Access is often easier to accomplish for researchers that share some type of similarities or relatable qualities to the individuals that they are studying and/or co-producing data with through interviews and participant observation. I am a seventh generation Mississippian, and I have a slightly southern accent. Although these two details seem inconsequential, they were important to the individuals that I met. My ability to answer “just where are you from?” with a southern accent and provide answers that were familiar to individuals made the recruitment and trust building process easier.

While I was not raised in the cattle industry, at the beginning of this project I had a detailed familiarity with it due to my previous work as a Congressional staffer for a Mississippi member with agriculture casework responsibilities, my family members’ employment in the agriculture sector, and my upbringing in competitive rodeo in the state. Due to my experiences and ties, I could easily talk the basic lingo of policy and production, but my knowledge and jargon were limited. Nevertheless, since I had a basic understanding of agriculture and didn’t stick out (too badly) at cattle auctions, farm shows, and organizational meetings, producers were generally welcoming and allowed me to interview them. I would not have had the same access to participants if I did not

have the background in Mississippi policy, network connections with agricultural organizations due to my time as a congressional staffer, or my native status as a “Mississippian.”

Unsurprisingly, Mississippi’s rich history—social, economic, political, and cultural—was not explicitly mentioned during any of my interviews or during my time conducting participant observation. Nevertheless, the contextual and historical factors of place had and have immense impacts on individuals. Although outside the scope of this thesis, the power struggles, inequalities experienced, and triumphs of Mississippians and of Mississippi detailed in the works of Mitchell (2014), Cobb (1992), and Busbee, Jr. (2015) greatly shaped the state. Historian Valerie Grim (2017:16) argues that, “As read from the bottom up and top down, the history of agriculture in Mississippi tells some of the most revealing stories about the state’s social, political, cultural, and economic history.” I concur.

While it is improbable to cover the entire scope of Mississippi history to contextualize this thesis, I stress that (like other states), Mississippi’s agricultural industry has been and is currently dominated by white men, beginning with removal of Native Americans from the land and the enslavement of African people who were forced to farm the state’s acreage (Grim 2017; Reynolds 2002; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014b). In Mississippi, slavery was “inextricably intertwined with agriculture” as initial growth within the industry was a direct result of slave labor (Libby 2017:1155). The state’s formal designation as a territory coincides with the rapid growth of the cotton industry built on cotton slavery (Libby 2004). The political, social, and economic structures of Mississippi agriculture were created during the state’s early territorial period in the 1790s

to 1820s, a time period when there were extreme conflicts between white farmers, Native Americans, and enslaved people of color over land and labor (Grim 2017).

From their inception, agricultural organizations were formally segregated by race—and they remain so today (Green, Green, and Weaver 2017; Reynolds 2002). Women and people of color are largely absent from historical organizational or governmental accounts of agriculture within the state, which is especially egregious given the historical realities of this state (e.g., see Blake 1971, 1996; Mississippi Department of Agriculture 1985). Although changing slowly, whites have traditionally held the majority of governmental county agricultural committee positions. In 2007, only 3 percent of all USDA Farm Service Agency county committee members in Mississippi were people of color (Fletcher 2017). At that time, 11.2 percent of all Mississippi farmers were people of color and comprised nearly 41 percent of the total Mississippi population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2009).

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, Dunbar Rowland (1907:46) wrote that in Mississippi “there are two classes, the land owners and the land workers....” The landowners have been and are still largely white; the land workers were traditionally black (Daniel 2013; Gilbert et al. 2002; U.S. Department of Agriculture 2014). Mississippi property laws barred people of color from owning land prior to 1865, and even as people of color gained access to purchase property post Civil-War, they had difficulties accessing the economic capital needed to be successful farming (Daniel 2013; Wood 2017) Because of property rights laws, the marketing influence of cooperatives and agricultural organizations, and the importance of county committees in securing agricultural funding from the government historically, white producers were able to

reproduce class and race inequalities over time through land usage, their positions on county committees, and via political decisions through the power of agricultural organizations (Daniel 2013; Fletcher 2017; Grim 2017). Mississippi is unique; however, it is extremely similar to other states where struggles over farm programs center on racial and class hierarchies (Fletcher 2017).

Research Design

Qualitative methods allow for a naturalistic approach to the research subject, situating the researcher inside the world of the research participant (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Jennifer Mason (2002:1) summarizes the importance of qualitative research by stating:

“Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate. We can do all of this qualitatively by using methodologies that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them. Instead of editing these elements out in search of the general picture or the average, qualitative research factors them directly into its analyses and explanations. This means that it has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts.”

As Mason (2002) highlights, a central value of qualitative research is the researcher’s ability to examine how things happen and how people construct meanings in

specific contexts. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I focused closely on the research participants' point of view, examined the constraints at play in their lives, and provided robust descriptions of the processes at work in their decisions and abilities to secure government funding.

Participant Observation

Following the work of Charmaz (2006), grounded theory guided all portions of the data production process. I began by spending time orienting myself to the field—attending agricultural events—and then later began interviewing cattle producers. Between February 2016 and July 2018, I spent 289 hours conducting participant observation at 52 different agricultural events. I attended a widespread range of events with cattle producers: annual agricultural, commodity, or cattle breed association meetings; agricultural organization award banquets; agricultural “field day” demonstrations; live cattle auctions; working “load-outs” of live cattle; cattle shows; agricultural socials; and agricultural family marketing events. Although some of these events were not affiliated with a formal agricultural organization, many were. I attended the meetings, socials, events, or conferences of eight different agricultural organizations in Mississippi: (1) a general commodity organization; (2) a second general commodity organization, (3) a general agricultural advisory council, (4) a general agricultural organization, (5) an agricultural association for a specific age group, (6) a gender-specific general agricultural organization, (7) a gender-specific commodity organization, and finally (8) a minority-led general agricultural organization.

Using the model of observation articulated by Spradley (1980), the first few months of participant observation experiences were for orientation and discovery,

whereas later experiences in the field served as focused observation and selective observation. Spending time “in the field” (metaphorically and literally) with producers that I interviewed at agricultural events allowed me to observe them as they interacted with their peers and compare this with the discussions that we had while talking in private.

During my fieldwork, I carried a small black moleskin notebook and a digital tape recorder. I took a limited amount of jottings in my notebook or digital notes on my smartphone while in the field during presentations, speeches, and at other times when it would be appropriate and inconspicuous to be notetaking. Following the conclusion of events, I would handwrite, type, or voice record (and later transcribe) more detailed notes about the event. These informal jottings yielded rich observations that I was later able to read, code, and analyze (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011).

Recruitment

By attending agricultural events (organizational events, sales, marketing events, etc.) all across the state of Mississippi, I met a wide range of producers and industry professionals. I recruited the initial producers for interviews from agricultural events. I asked those producers as well as industry professionals (e.g., Mississippi State University Extension agents, veterinarians, cattle semen salesmen, cattle haulers, etc.) that I met to provide names of other cattle producers for me to contact. When snowball sampling, I purposefully did not provide producers or industry professionals with any “guidelines” of what type of person I was hoping for them to recommend for me to contact. With the exception of the name of one black male (who I interviewed but is not included in this thesis), every person recommended to me for an interview was a white male. Notably, it

was a young, white, female industry professional that recommended the sole minority producer that I interviewed; no white cattle producers that I met recommended interviewing any women or minority producers.

For this project, I used theoretical and snowball sampling. Because I sampled initially through agricultural organizations, self-selection limited my ability to reach producers that were wary of involvement and/or not regularly attending any agricultural events or connected to individuals in agricultural organizations. Therefore, participants in this study are those that I was able to identify as cattle producers through some sort of network tie: friends or industry contacts via snowball sampling, cattle related places of business (auction barns and farm stores), and cattle related organizations. I followed a theoretical sampling design; I interviewed participants until I reached a “saturation point” where interviews did not yield additional viewpoints, perspectives, and insights to the rich data previously collected (Charmaz 2006).

Interviews

Over a two year period, I conducted 33 interviews with white men who are cattle producers in Mississippi. The 33 producers lived in 24 different counties—2 counties in the Delta region, 7 counties from the Central region, 11 counties from the North Region, and 4 counties from the Coastal (South) region.¹⁰ Almost two-thirds (n=21) of the producers work off-farm in some capacity, whereas 12 producers that I interviewed are full-time farmers/producers. Most agricultural organizations have specific programs for “young farmers” who are under 35 years old. Of the producers I interviewed, 27 percent

¹⁰ These regional categories (Delta, North, Central, and Coastal) are the agricultural regions of Mississippi as defined by the Mississippi State University Extension Service.

(n=9) are classified as “young farmers.” In regards to use of programs, nearly 70 percent (n=23) of the producers I talked with use federal agricultural programs.

I drove down everything from newly paved interstates to red clay and gravel dirt roads to get to interviews. I regularly dodged guineas, opossums, and potholes. Coupled with participant observation, the semi-structured interviews with farmers were crucially important in helping me understand participants’ views and perspectives. The personal, interactive nature of semi-structured interviews allowed for more rich descriptions and answers from participants than if I had used other methods (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

I had substantial difficulties obtaining interviews from producers due to struggles in scheduling interviews with participants. As mentioned above, nearly two-thirds (n=21) of the producers that I interviewed for this study work off of their farms. Hence, these producers were usually unable to meet during the workday. I normally met farmers that work off-farm on the weekends. It was much easier to schedule producers that work in farming full-time as they have more control over their day-to-day schedule. Both full-time and part-time off farm producers often told me to come “whenever it rains” because that’s the only time they did not need to be outside working on their farm.

I conducted all of the interviews at the time and in a location of the participant’s choosing. I preferred to visit the participant’s farm because it allowed me to interact with the producers in a natural setting and observe their farming operations. While I encouraged producers to have the interviews at their farm, it was not always feasible, and I found myself interviewing producers at a variety of locations. Off of their farms, I interviewed producers at: local cafés, their place of off-farm employment, Mississippi State University Extension offices, cattle shows, cattle auction rings, and agricultural

organizational headquarters. On farms, I interviewed producers at their kitchen tables, in their farm shop (a place where equipment and tools are stored), and at farm offices. In summary, I interviewed producers wherever they told me was the most convenient.

Although it was often difficult to schedule interviews with producers, when I did meet with producers they were generous with their time. During my time on and off farms and at agricultural events, I frequently met producers' spouses, children, grandchildren, hired hands, neighbors, and on one occasion, the tractor repair man. Even though I did not exclude anyone else present with the producer from the interviews, usually only the male producer opted to participate in the semi-structured, tape recorded interview. Only five of the formal interviews included other participants—two producers' wives joined their spouse's interview and multiple adult children joined the producer during three of the interviews.

Interviews were conducted in semi-structured format, allowing for the producer and/or spouse/children to interject when he or she felt necessary and for me to ask follow-up, probing questions when needed. Questions during the interview were aimed to elicit participants' experiences, ideas, and conceptualizations, allowing me to discover how they conceptualize a "good farmer" and their own identities, their meaning making process around why they farm, their participation in agricultural organizations, their experiences or lack of experiences in applying for and receiving USDA grants and loans, and, finally, the importance of their social network within the agricultural community. If an adult child or spouse attended the interview and agreed to participate, he or she answered the same questions after the male producer. See Appendix A for a sample interview guide.

With the exception of one interview that was not able to be recorded due to an equipment malfunction, all interviews were recorded with a digital tape recorder and later transcribed. This study and methodology were approved by the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board and followed all federal and university guidelines for research with human subject participants.

At the conclusion of the interview, I provided research participants with a \$10 gift card as a small token of appreciation for their time. Several participants outright refused to accept the gift cards and demanded that I not ask again for them to take it. A few participants asked if I had provided the gift cards or if Mississippi State University funded the gift cards. They were comfortable accepting the gift cards if they were not from me. One producer explained he could not accept the gift card because, “Well, you have a new baby. Go buy your baby some diapers with this money!” This example depicts how my interactions with the producers were shaped by social structure and my own positionality.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Research is never value neutral; researchers approach topics, people, and places with their own biases and standpoints (Flick 2014; Marshall and Rossman 2016). Reflexivity is “the practice of consistently and candidly examining how we, as fieldworkers, constantly impinge on, and even transform, the phenomena we aim to study” (Stuart 2018:211–12). Successful research endeavors require that researchers acknowledge reflexivity and their own positionality.

Prior to beginning this research, I spent a significant amount of time thinking about the reflexive questions of research positionality as emphasized by Marshall and

Rossman (2016:118): “What do I know? How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective? With what voice do I share my perspective? What do I do with what I have found?” My initial knowledge of the industry stems from my background in agriculture industry family—I had horses growing up and spent time with cattle farming families as my mother is a large animal veterinarian. My father also works in higher education in an agricultural discipline, and through my association with him I learned about the technological and educational aspects of farming. I also interned at the U.S. Department of Agriculture during college and later worked for four years as a Congressional staffer working on U.S. Department of Agriculture casework for Mississippians living in Mississippi’s first congressional district.

In this role as a Congressional staffer, I became closely acquainted with stories of success and failure from farmers seeking my help on their casework. My experience working to help farmers—who often asked me: why do others succeed when I don’t?—challenged me to think critically about agriculture. Keenly interested in rural places, inequalities, and federal programs, I began this research interested to learn how and why Mississippi farmers pursue federal farm programs. Understanding these key questions, as well as how they understand success within the industry—was the impetus of this research.

As a researcher, I viewed my role as a co-constructor of data (Charmaz 2006; Gubrium and Holstein 2014). I acknowledge that “neither data nor theories are discovered, but researchers construct them as a result of their interactions with their participants and emerging analyses” (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014:154). I recognize that as the researcher, I held a significant degree of power throughout the research process

(Elwood and Martin 2000; Flick 2014). Because of this, I did my best to minimize my own influence by allowing participants to select the location of the interview, the flow of the interview, and at the conclusion of the interview, I spent time probing if they had additional questions or issues that they would like to talk about regarding farming and the topics that we had discussed. Usually, the participants had numerous questions for me—but only asked after the tape recorder was turned off. Producers asked about my views on Mississippi State football, presidential politics, the purpose of sociology, and what other farmers had told me in their answers. Producers were most often interested in learning more about why I study farmers and if I am a Mississippi State athletics fan. I made field jottings and memos about these rich, engaging conversations.

Because trust is a central component of a successful interview, I purposefully did not portray myself as an outsider to cattle producers. My identity as a young, white, middle class woman with an agricultural background and my ability to portray the “agricultural lifestyle” in my attire and speech helped me to build rapport with participants. To the producers, my status as a woman and a “researcher” at “State” marked me as an outsider; if I had worked to differentiate myself as a complete “outsider” I do not think I would have been able to get producers to consent to allow me to visit their farms and interview them.

Unlike other research projects that I have worked on as a graduate student, the individuals I interviewed did not ask me to help them change anything or make suggestions to me about things within the federal government that needed to be modified. This is drastically different from my previous work with farmers of color in Mississippi. The privileges of my white identity and status as a researcher affiliated with a public

university—visible in previous studies to producers of color—were not highlighted by the producers in this study. Nevertheless, throughout this research, I worked to be mindful and reflexive about how my own identity, privilege, and power as the researcher shaped this research.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2016:214) describe the process of qualitative analysis as, “a search for general statements about relationships and underlying themes; it explores and describes and builds grounded theory.” In qualitative analyses, often times the process of coding, analysis, and interpretation are conducted simultaneously, meaning that the researcher is moving back-and-forth from coding, analyzing, and interpreting the data (Luker 2008). This makes the entire process appear inexplicable; however, a researcher’s goal is not only to identify underlying actions and processes, but also to succinctly present them and provide thorough descriptions of the methodological process, thereby enabling others to evaluate and comprehend his or her findings (Flick 2014; Luker 2008; Thornberg and Charmaz 2014).

For this thesis, I used grounded theory as outlined by Charmaz (2006, 2011) and Thorton and Charmaz (2014) to guide my data analysis. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, I conducted open and selective coding. Although technically two phases of coding, “coding is not a linear process” and I would “move back and forth between the different phases of coding” throughout the data analysis process with the majority of open coding occurring in early coding stages and selective coding at latter stages (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014:156). The aim of each step was to “compare data with data as [I] develop[ed] codes...compare data with codes...compare codes and raise

significant codes to tentative categories...treat major category(ies) as a concept(s)...and last, compare concepts with concepts” (Charmaz 2011). To do this, I used MAXQDA 12 Plus to manage the data as I coded.

In constructivist grounded theory, there “is never a fixed endpoint nor an exact portrayal of reality, but always remains provisional and open to later modification” (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014:167). I ceased sampling and analyzing the data when I reached theoretical saturation—“meaning that gathering fresh data no longer spark[ed] new theoretical insights, nor reveal[ed] new properties of the generated grounded theory and its categories or concepts” (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014:167). In the next chapter, I discuss my findings developed using these methods.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

In this project, I explored how producers make sense of the various structures in their everyday lives and make choices about their farming operations. Specifically, this work was guided by my central research question: “How do Mississippi cattle producers portray their decisions to pursue (or not pursue) government farm programs?” Through conducting this research, I learned that producers’ conceptualization of “success” and what it means to be a “good farmer” shaped their decision to apply or not apply for government farm programs. In this chapter, I first begin by examining the reasons and explanations that farmers provided for participating in farm programs. Second, I discuss how farmers’ understandings of what it meant to participate in farm programs was interwoven with how producers viewed “success.” Third, I explore what it means to be a “good farmer” to these producers and how masculinity and a strong adherence to the ideology of the American Dream shaped producers’ notions of success. I document how the farmers differed in their understandings about success, and how these differences were associated with producers portraying their decisions about whether or not to participate in government farm programs differently. Lastly, I consider how whiteness shaped producers’ depictions of their choices regarding farm programs.

Opting to Participate or Not in Government Farm Programs

Producers provided various reasons—and sometimes a combination of reasons—for participating or not participating in government farm programs. Farmers explained that their central reasons to pursue government farm programs were (1) as a solution for uncertainty, (2) efficiency, and (3) profitability. Farmers also shared reasons for not pursuing government farm programs: (1) the “headache” of dealing with a government entity and (2) a reluctance to take “free money.”

Reasons Why Producers Pursue Government Farm Programs

Jeff, a middle-aged business manager who has about 25 head of cattle, explained that government farm programs are a solution for uncertainty. Discussing the ups and downs of the cattle market during the last century, Jeff highlighted that the government’s role in agriculture is to eliminate risk and provide farmers with assistance when needed.

Kelli: Thinking about your own operation, what are the resources or factors that help you to be successful?

Jeff: I've been deep in debt way back, and I was financed through, uh, what used to be Farmer's Home back then. And, it was tough to get that done because of ... I wasn't born with no spoon in my mouth, golden spoon. I mean, my mom and dad worked for single digit incomes when they were raising me. But, anyway, uh, there are some good programs through the FSA office.... Sometimes [using the programs] can mean keep [the farm and cattle], or the bank come get it. The difference can depend on from those programs.

Jeff’s answer depicts how some producers believed that farm programs were an important safety net or a risk minimizer for them. Jeff, like many respondents, emphasized that

farmers who are hardworking—like how he characterizes himself throughout the interview—sometimes experience hardship in farming and farm programs help minimize financial risks. Travis, a young producer with a growing commercial herd, expressed the same sentiment when I asked him about his use of farm programs:

Travis: Fact, I was talking to this guy, couple, this probably been three weeks ago now, and we was talking about USDA subsidizing you with money or whatever. He said, "You know, I just don't feel right taking that money because I don't need it." He said, "There's somebody else out there who can, or needs it more than I do, and if I apply for it, there's a chance that they won't get it." And I said, "I totally agree with that. I do. 100%. But, at the same time, you may not need it today, but tomorrow might be your day that you need it, and you didn't sign up for it today."

Travis had no misgivings about signing up for farm programs because he acknowledged that even if he didn't currently need the programs now, he might need the money from them in the future. Likewise, Shawn, a welder and a producer with a small herd from central Mississippi told me, "Well, [farm programs] kind helps you keep you going. Because, I mean cattle don't always make enough money... and when they offer a program, it always helps out." Similar to Jeff and Travis, Shawn discussed the amount of work he put in to keeping the farm running and how he viewed farm programs as a solution for uncertainty.

Ryan, a young farmer with roughly 100 head of cattle, noted that he participates in farm programs to make his farming operation more efficient. After I asked him why he participated in farm programs, Ryan responded:

Just to do enhancements to the farm. So [a USDA official] was there and allocated [money] to every individual county. It was basically just [for], you know, any kind of improvements. [Anything] I can do to farm and make it more, to run more, efficiently, um, I'm *all about* signing up for the programs.”

Throughout my time with him, Ryan shared how important it was to be efficient in farming, efficient in: how you work your land, how you schedule your cattle breeding, and how you select grazing options. Ryan and others, like Danny, a producer from North Mississippi, talked about efficiency and the use of farm programs using business-like language. Others, like Adam, discussed an ethos of efficiency from a spiritual lens. When talking about his perspective on farming and farm programs, Adam stated: “I think one thing we would want to say is that um, the, the Lord has given us these cattle and we're expected to take good care of them and, and I think that hopefully he would be pleased with how we take care of them.” For Adam, he explained to me that “taking good care” meant being a competent, well-organized, efficient producer. Bruce, who owns a commercial herd of black and white baldies, told me that he prayed that “the good Lord would smile on him” and viewed participating in farm programs as a way to further his religious desire to be a good, efficient steward of what he had been given. Ryan and the other producers who used farm programs viewed best practices in farming as being an effective and good steward of their land and cattle. They regarded using government farm programs as a means to make improvements to their farms and a demonstration of good, effective stewardship—either from a business or biblical vantage point.

Several producers also candidly shared that they used farm programs to increase their profitability. Norm, who with his family runs a large commercial cattle herd, told

me that you have to “study the economics of [farm programs and farming]” because you must study your profit margin. Farm programs, Norm explained, are helpful because they increase a farmer’s ability to turn a profit. Rob, a producer from north Mississippi with a large herd, talked with me about the persistence needed to complete the application process. I questioned why he pursued the programs if they were difficult to use, he explained:

Rob: You basically got to call [the office] once a month [to find out about programs available].

Kelli: Do you do that?

Rob: Yes. For that amount of money, you got to do it. You've got to do everything you can or you'll lose money!

Like Norm and the other producers that used federal farm programs, Rob’s focus on profitability overlaps with the previously mentioned reasoning of a solution for uncertainty and being more efficient as a producer. Profitability, as Rob later discussed with me, allows a producer to be more flexible, a better caretaker of the land, and have more certainty (and therefore less uncertainty) going into the next year. Although all three reasons were distinct throughout my interviews with producers, many farmers oftentimes shared a combination of reasons why they pursued farm programs.

Reasons Why Producers Opt Not to Participate in Government Farm Programs

The majority of producers who did not participate in government farm programs noted that they opted not to participate because they did not like the “headache” of dealing with the government. Specifically, producers discussed their dislike of government regulations and the lag time for application approval. Although some

producers who used government programs critiqued the programs as onerous at times, they did not view the steps of interacting with USDA as limiting to their involvement in farm programs.

Mitchell owns a large cow-calf farming operation in central Mississippi. Wearing a baseball cap with his farm logo on it, he proudly discussed his business acumen at length with me. He repeatedly mentioned his attention being businesslike during our time together, so I was somewhat surprised when he scoffed at the idea of participating in government programs. He flatly stated, “The little bit of money they dangle in front of you, for the restrictions they put on you, a lot of times it's not worth it.” Nicolas, a small farm cattle producer from south Mississippi, echoed Mitchell:

Kelli: Have you participated in any of farm programs? Why or why not?

Nicholas: I never have. Uh, you know, just simply if we- we needed something done, we just [do it].... You have to comply to their guidelines and what-not on fences and programs and things like that. So that's kind of what I'm weighing in my mind is do I want that? Is it worth it? To get a little money for, you know, the work? Or should I just go do it myself?

Producers told me that they oftentimes opted not to do the work; make the improvements to their land; or buy additional land, cattle, or equipment because they simply did not want to handle the government “red tape.”

Several of the producers that opted not to use government programs mentioned that part of the “headache” of dealing with the government was the wait time for application approval. Vernon, a large cattle operation owner from North Mississippi, and

I discussed his disdain for the lag period from when a producer wants to pursue something and government approval:

Kelli: Why do you not participate?

Vernon: Well, like, uh, cleaning out a pool. It takes too long for a feller like me. If I want a pool cleaned out, I get it cleaned out today—not next month or next year! You know, I want build a fence. I got to build a fence today or tomorrow, not wait a year, to, like they do a lot of them programs, you know. And maybe, I get kinda peeved off at them because I can't get it done today, you know.

Dealing with the government's restrictions for the funding, the wait time for approval, and the paperwork that went along with it was "too much of a headache" as Melvin said. Producers like him, Nicholas, Vernon, Melvin, and Mitchell opted to do the work themselves or not do it at all rather than interact with the USDA.

A select group of producers secondarily discussed their dislike of taking "free" money. Here, my conversation with William shows his reluctance to pursue government programs:

Kelli: Do you use any government farm programs? Why or why not?

William: They've got good programs. And I have to, I guess maybe I'm at the point that I, I just feel that I can pay for it, you know. And some people can't and I just, I don't know, I feel bad going in and asking for something that I know good and well I can pay for it.

William, the oldest farmer I interviewed, discussed his age and implied his age and socio-economic status was part of his reasoning for not accepting the funding. In contrast,

Christopher, the youngest farmer I interviewed who happens to have a cattle operation the same size as William, shared a similar sentiment, but for a different reason:

Kelli: I would like to hear your perspective on USDA programs. I'd like to know if you're familiar with them and, if you are, like, have you applied for them before?

Christopher: I'm familiar with a few of them. I know they offer assistance with cross fencing and water trough pads and things of that nature. Um, I do not apply for them, personally. I guess the reason behind it would be principle, or I don't know. It's kinda like, it's, you know, it's a *subsidized*. Subsidizing farming is, I guess what it really is, you know.

For William, Christopher, and others like them, opting to use government farm programs felt like accepting unearned money or subsidizing their farming operation. Christopher and Leon held out on principle that farm programs are subsidies—and through my conversations eschewed their disdain for subsidies of any kind. William's approach differed insofar as he endorsed the idea of government support in agriculture through farm programs, although he shared he didn't feel appropriate in accepting them.

Like the producers who opted to use government farm programs, producers who did not pursue them oftentimes shared a myriad of reasons why they believed government programs to not be worth the “headache” but no farmers used both reasons—that working with government programs is a too much of a “headache” or shared that they disliked taking “free money.”

Summary: The Developers and the Independents

For the producers that used farm programs, the programs were inherently good. Farm programs were good things because they helped the producer mitigate risk, be efficient, and more profitable. I call these producers the *developers*. For those that opted not to use farm programs, they explained their lack of patience to wait on the program approval and funding, their disdain for government regulations, and (for some), their dislike of participating in what they felt like was a “government handout program.” In this study, I call these producers the *independents*.

Although producers’ reasons for participating and not participating in government farm programs seem simple and superficial, producers’ choices reflect complex, differing ideological positions. Hence, I attach the labels developers and independents not for their use of government farm programs, but rather the strategies that they report using in pursuit of success and achievement of being a “good farmer.” In the next section, I focus on their discussions of success and how their answers aligned with their views of government programs. The final section focuses on a more sociological discussion of their ideologies of success—of what it means to be “a good farmer”—by comparing the *developers* and the *independents*.

Factors for Success in Farming

I began each interview asking the producer to describe why they farm. Almost every single producer shared that they farmed because they viewed farming as part of who they are and they have a passion for it. Kenneth, a producer from North Mississippi, explained that being a farmer is “who I am, and, I can't anymore explain it [anymore] than I can why grass grows. But, golly, there's nothing better!” Vince, who owns a large

herd of black and white baldy crossbred cattle in Central Mississippi, simply summed: “I love it. I love the cow business!”

Through my discussions with producers about why they farmed, I also asked them how they operated their farm. Our conversations ranged from practical to philosophical. As a part of my line of questioning about how they farm, I also asked producers what helps them be successful. They provided a range of answers regarding their: farm laborers, network, family ties, spirituality, and use of technology. The most prevalent answer, however, was their work ethic.

Kelli: What helps you be successful? What are those factors, if you were going to name off a few things that help you be successful, what are they?

Christopher: Well, this is probably gonna be your number one answer from everyone that you interview: a lot of hard work. Takes a lot of dedication. There's a lot of determination, too, because it's not always easy. It can be frustrating, parts of it can. But I'd say hard work, determination, and dedication probably gonna be the top three.

Christopher was right; hard work was the most common answer producers shared with me. Overwhelmingly, producers viewed their own hard work as a key to their success. Work ethic was the primary thing, and the other factors that they discussed were secondary to the emphasis that they placed on their own effort. Many of them discussed the hours of the work and linked it to success, like Bill did. He told me that for success, “it's the hours and the work and the time that you put into it, ‘cause farming is a, is not an eight to five job. It's 24 hour, seven days a week, when you look at it!”

But, even though every producer stressed their hard work and the hours that they put in, there were marked differences in the ways producers talked about success. Developers discussed success as a pursuit or process—the pursuit of better cattle, land, and profits. The independents viewed success as an achievement or destination—longevity in the industry “without” external support. In the following two subsections, I address the developers and independents’ varying answers of what success means and what helps make them successful. Here, I work to specifically answer the question: What is the relationship between how producers make sense of success and choices to utilize government farm programs?

The Developers

Always Improving

Most of the developers shared that an aspect of their passion for farming was always improving. They focused on improving their product, their land, and their profits. I sat with Chad, a producer from the Mississippi Gulf Coast region, in a wood-paneled office as he talked about his love of farming, his sons’ show calves, and his quest of growing his farm.

Kelli: Why do you farm? Why do you do what you do?

Chad: I do it for the love of the land and the cattle. Uh, pretty much just to be, to be with nature. I just I love cattle. I love to see the circle. To me it's a circle. You breed 'em. You calve 'em. You watch the calf grow. Breed 'em back. You sell your calf, and you wait for 'em to come with that next calf. So you kind of can see what you're doing, and you hope to *improve* and, and look, I look forward to

every year—seeing it, seeing the cattle, *better* cattle. Uh, seeing 'em improve in that I do.

Chad and other producers I met, like Travis and Ryan, focused on bettering their cattle herd's genetics. They want the highest amount of daily weight gain from their calves. Others, like Wesley, a cattle producer with a large herd of commercial cattle, focused on bettering his land.

Kelli: So, thinking specifically about what falls under your farm, what would you say are factors that help you be successful?

Wesley: We have a really good crew that works for us, I guess. And our ... We have a good crew that works for us. I, like right now, I'm here. I don't have to be down at the shop babysittn'. I don't have to be hands on. I got one guy cutting hay, two working on the head. And then we have pretty good land. I mean it's good land. We've done, worked hard on developing it up and building it up.

Wesley acknowledges that he has good land, but emphasizes that he's "worked hard" to develop it into what it is.

The developers also repeatedly noted their hard work to improve their profits and how they stress to others that it is important to be financially savvy. Ryan and I discussed his work on improving the farm profits throughout his interview, and later, when we talked about advice and how to emulate his success, he shared:

Kelli: You're a fifth generation farmer. What advice do you have for someone who is just getting into farming?

Ryan: I would think that the most important thing that somebody, a beginning person going into it would be learn the value of the dollar.

But with the stress on profit, several producers emphasized that making the profit isn't always the end goal: it's pursuing it and improving it. I spoke with Russell, a small producer of registered cattle, over a cup of coffee, and he explained that: "You know, I'm out there *trying* to make a profit. I try to do that every time we get out there and work. Sometimes I don't do it, sometimes I do!" For Russell, his work on getting loans to improve his cattle herd genetics, adding cross-fencing on his farm through the use of government farm programs, and work to achieve those goals made him feel successful because he is moving toward higher profits. Russell repeatedly accentuated that he was trying to make a profit, not that he actually always was.

This emphasis on progress—or continual development—is key. The developers, the farmers who stressed success as constant improvements and they used government farm programs, did not always have the prettiest pastures, best graded cattle, or highest profits. Otherwise, there would be a simple economic divide between farmers that would be readily apparent to the eye in regards to the look and size of their operations. No, developers are "developers" because of how they define being successful—the pursuit of improvement. Developers constantly stressed throughout my time with them in interviews and at events that the *goal* is developing better land, cattle, and profits. Many fell short of the goal (and admitted so); however, they stressed their work in aiming to improve their farming operations through hard work and targeted improvements to land and cattle in order to maximize profits.

Kenneth, a high school basketball coach and farmer, talked about the tensions of working to improve his farming operation. With self-depreciating humor, he said that his goals did not always align with his reality.

Kelli: So I'd like to hear you talk about essentially that what factors you think help you make, or like help you be successful in your operation, and I know you've mentioned management, genetics, and nutrition. So those three things, you've said, are huge factors for you, but what else would you say is really important in addition to those things?

Kenneth: Well, I was, I am blessed to, to have, um, a lot of infrastructure from the dairy—pastures, fencing, water troughs, and the facility around the old dairy barn to work cattle. And to start out without that and try to build into it would really be tough! So, I've on one hand, someone could say, "Well, you've got an unfair advantage," but I don't consider that unfair at all, I earned it. You know, I, me and my family built it. Then, what makes me profitable is the nutrition part of it, and the, and the cows eat grass, and the grass is a gift. You have soil, you have sunshine, and if you take care of your soil, you have grass, and cows eat grass, and they gain [weight] on grass. And, uh, you know, at a certain point certain parts of their production cycle the calves may need a little supplement, they need a little feed, and I have a feed shed too, which was a, a nice thing. But just understanding that these cattle eat grass, you don't have to crank a tractor. And, and I, I really, and the more I read, and I love to read and learn, and it's what one thing that makes it so much fun, um, is, is the less you do, in so many respects, the better the cattle there. Now we take care of the, the vaccinations and, and, you know, all that, but when it comes to just everyday, all they need is grass. And you take them from this pasture and put them in this pasture. I love, I love riding out in the pasture on the four wheeler, because they go, "Where are we going next?"

And they're ready to go to the next pasture. They, you know, they don't want every pasture, they just want the next pasture. And so, you let the grass regrow and, and it's just a cycle. And when, when we're blessed with a rainfall, um, then you have a lot of grass. This time last year we didn't have rainfall, we didn't have grass, and I like to say, [laughs] "I thought I was a pretty good farmer till the rain quit!"

Kenneth's answer sums the view of the developer: his farm is a work in progress, but what he has accomplished he's "earned" and he's constantly learning and looking of ways to improve. As I discussed in the previous section, government farm programs offer opportunities to improve the farm and maximize profits, leading developers like Ryan to say "you know, any kind of improvements. [Anything] I can do to farm and make it more, to run more, efficiently, um, I'm *all about* signing up for the programs."

Leveraging Networks

Danny and I ate at the local diner in his hometown on a busy Friday at lunchtime. He bragged on his children and shared about his love for farming. We then discussed his view of success and the factors important for his success on his farm.

Kelli: So thinking about why you farm and what you farm, what do you feel like are big factors that help you be successful in that operation?

Danny: You have to be efficient.

Efficiency for Danny meant improving his farm in the most cost-conscious manner. He told me that he accomplished this by diversifying his farm portfolio and growing crops in addition to owning a large cattle herd. He then further admitted that there was something more that helped him be successful: his network and his ability to leverage his network if

needed. Danny said that he hears about programs and opportunities “just through word of mouth” and through his use of Mississippi State University Extension. He explained: “You know, we use Mississippi State a lot, I guess they're trying to be all about bugs, and soil tests, and this that and the other.” Danny uses formal organizations and his informal social network for help in improving his cattle operation.

Numerous other developers told me that they use their friends, extended family, and local agricultural organizations to help them gain knowledge, funds, or connections to advance their farming operations. Roger told me that the agricultural associations were an immense asset to be leveraged, but you had to build local connections to be able to have a group to hear something via “word of mouth.” The developers viewed their local networks as key parts of their success as they provided information and knowledge of how to improve.

Aside from networks, producers occasionally discussed other avenues that helped them be successful. Travis acknowledged that he uses “the world wide web” and Dylan admitted that he relies heavily on “new technology.” Danny also discussed what his daughter called his “secret”—he pays for assistance. Danny told me that he recently began employing someone to help him navigate USDA programs and fill in the gaps in his network connections to help improve his farm. He pays a man he met, loosely defined as an informal “consultant,” through a contact to keep him updated on programs, opportunities, or technology. Danny viewed this contact as one to be kept “private” because he didn’t want to get the man in “trouble” if other people were to know that Danny pays him for advice and help navigating different organizational structures.

Summary: The Developers

Chad, Wesley, Ryan, Kenneth, and the other developers I spent time with highlighted their desire to improve their farms and in turn have better land, better profits, and the very best livestock. They were, in essence, focused on always developing the best product (cattle) and further developing their inputs (land). Success and being a good farmer for the developer meant using their land, family, network, and work ethic to work towards the goals of pretty, profitable pastures and quality cattle.

The Independents

Vernon is a talker—only pausing in his answers to spit out tobacco or answer his cell phone. I had been at his office for roughly two hours talking with him about his farm when I asked him my last question:

Kelli: Okay! My last question is just about advice. Who do you get your advice from and who you give advice to?

Vernon: I don't get advice from anybody.

Startled at his short answer after lengthy conversations on why and how he farms, I probed further, but Vernon was adamant: he didn't get advice from anyone else. Like other independents, Vernon emphasized his work on his farming operation as a solo venture. In contrast to the developers who stressed their work in leveraging assets and organizations at their disposal to improve their farming operations, independents highlighted their level of experience and work on their own without the help of anyone, including their networks, the government, and various organizations.

Todd is a medium sized producer in Central Mississippi. He is well-known within the industry and has an untold amount of contacts. Several different producers

recommended that I “talk with Todd!” when I was first beginning my research. Because of his large network, I expected him to discuss his connections during our interview.

However, he rarely emphasized them:

Kelli: Okay and what do you think it means to be successful in cattle production?

And, what factors help you be successful?

Todd: Uh, a little of all of it I mean you, you learn something new every day in the cattle business. You don't never get, I don't get to learn everything but mostly people and just hands on the operation really.

Kelli: Organizations are another resource that sometimes farmers use. Do you, are you a part of any ag organizations?

Todd: No ma'am.

Kelli: Okay, why not?

Todd: I've just, like I said I'm old school. I go to my farm. I tend to my business and let everybody else do their own thing.

Mitchell answered similarly, stating that the factors for his success “comes from experience.” Although Todd, Mitchell, and the other independents discussed “people” and even family at times, they placed the primary emphasis throughout my time with them on their experience. Where developers would name people by name or title as resources and individuals who help them be successful, the independents, like Todd, never mentioned anyone by name—only generic “others” or “people.”

A part of the independents’ focus on experience was also an emphasis on independence. Todd, as mentioned above, said he just works to “let everybody else do their own thing” while he focuses on his own farm. While age and experience tend be

synonymous at times, “experience” was not a stand in for “age” as producers shared their views on farming and their reasons for success. For example, Christopher, a twenty-something with little actual farming experience, stressed that his love of farming is because of the “lifestyle” and “experience” that allows him to “be his own boss” and “independent.” When I questioned if he ran his entire cattle operations without any outside help he quietly shared that he “technically” did although sometimes he asked extended family for their assistance. When I queried if his extended family were a part of his success—he answered a resounding “no.”

This is a key part of the independents’ viewpoints: they see their success as a part of their own independent hard work. They stress their experiences and the fact that they are still in the industry—while going it “alone”—as a mark of their success. Nevertheless, when pressed like Christopher, they oftentimes admitted that other people may or may not have had a role in it; however, they did not count others as factors in their success.

Summary: The Independents

Vernon, Christopher, Mitchell, and the other independents that I met told me lengthy stories of *their* work. They talked about the hardships that they had endured, the challenges that they faced, and the risks that they took—and how hard they will have to work in the future—the long hours, the necessary risks, and the difficulties of farming. While all of the farmers I talked with discussed their work ethic and the long hours of farming, the independents emphasized these factors as the preeminent ones for their success, rarely (if ever) mentioning their land, their cattle, or their other network ties as factors. Success was being independent and keeping your independence. Paul, a middle

aged registered Charlois producer, depicts this idea as he discusses his management philosophy:

Kelli: What are the biggest factors that help you be successful in your operation? You've said management. What is that and what are those biggest factors that help you in management?

Paul: Okay, necessary management, and this is, and, if I kind of get off-track, you just say so, part of the management is figuring out what my capabilities are, uh, and what my limitations are. And, and, and, and, so, I'm going to say that, say this, we just (coughs) we just recently, three weeks ago, bought a little tractor [to bale hay with]. Well, I said "No more!" [to the old tractor because] I, you know, if I've got to stay out here 12, to 13 hours a day, and, and come dragging in, and I can't hardly get out of bed in the morning, 'cause I'm tired and, just drained from the heat. So, I found a little tractor to do that job with, it was an air conditioned cab and all that stuff. And, and, and that's, that was, you can call it a luxury, but truthfully, I call it good management, because, *I* can stay out there, *I* can do it.

Kelli: Right.

Paul: You know, I cannot be wore out if I'm going to be more effective tomorrow. And, that's, it's almost sounding like I'm trying to justify buying a tractor, you'd, like I did [to my] my wife.

Paul had some of the nicest equipment and infrastructure of any of the farms I went to—newer model John Deere tractors, fancy bunk feeders, new hay rings, and a clean, well-stocked hay barn. Todd, Mitchell, and Vernon also had tidy, well-kept farms with quality cattle and genetics. I point this out about Paul's farm and my conversation from above to

demonstrate how independents oftentimes have new equipment, great land, and quality cattle that is sometimes nicer than that of the developers, who have a specific focus on the improvement of their farms. The difference is that the independents don't highlight their work in improving their farms, cattle, or profits; instead, they stress their experience and how their independent, hard work is what makes them successful..

Summary: Factors of Success

Even though the producers collectively emphasized their passion and love of farming combined with their strong work ethic, the farmers I interviewed for this project had differing answers of what success meant and what factors mattered for them to achieve success. The developers viewed success as something to constantly pursue through improvement and using their networks wisely. Independents, conversely, saw their own experience, hard work, and independence as the hallmark factors of the achievement of their success.

Data show that the farmers' ideology of success—or what it means to be successful—was associated with their orientations to government farm programs. For developers that viewed success as improvement, government farm programs were appealing as they offered avenues for bettering your land and growing your farming operation. The independents viewed success as something achieved through independence and hard work; hence, they reported that their work would be better spent working on the farm than dealing with the “headache” of the government. Independents argued that they could do things more quickly and better by doing it themselves than by taking assistance from the government. Furthermore, many of them didn't like taking “subsidized” funds—it went against their ideology of success.

Although both independents and developers differ in their ideology of success, they still see themselves as being a “good farmer.” Hitherto, I have focused primarily on the respondents’ choices and what they view as the primary factors for their success, not the frameworks shaping their different ideologies. Next, I focus on their differing understandings of success and how their frameworks are informed and shaped by masculinity, whiteness, and the ideology of the American Dream.

Being a “Good Farmer”

For the producers that I interviewed for this project, being a “good farmer” like Kenneth talked about means being a successful farmer. But how farmers define success—improvement versus independence—was associated with the choices that they made when opting to pursue or not pursue government programs. Moving away from a description of producers’ choices and underlying assumptions of success, in this section I address the question: How are their ideologies of success shaped by the American Dream and conceptions of masculinity?

The American Dream

The ideology of the American Dream permeated all of my conversations with farmers. Like Johnson (2015:29), I found that the American Dream is “entrenched in daily life and culture, [people] are socialized to it throughout our lives.” The American Dream ideology shaped producers perspectives, strategies, and experiences; it helped them make sense of the social world and their place within it. Rank (2014:154–55) suggests that “the American Dream represents a blueprint for how many of us believe our individual journeys across life should play out.” For producers in this study, I found that

the American Dream was indeed a unifying ideology; however, the “rules of the game” were slightly different for developers and independents because they differed on how to successfully be a “good farmer” pursuing or achieving this American Dream.

Farmers and the American Dream

While gazing out a large bay window and talking about his family farm, Ryan told me that he thought it was very important for young people to learn how to farm and be encouraged to farm. Furthermore, he advocated for family farming only, not the industrialization of agriculture. I asked him to elaborate:

Kelli: Why is it important to you that we have younger generations come into farming, rather than transitioning into corporate farming?

Ryan: Ah, 'cause I think the little small farmers are what kind of built America. For Ryan and many of the other producers that I met during this project, the “good farmer” is the epitome of the American Dream because he is self-made, independent, and (in their eyes) a valued contributor to the economic and social fabric of society. Small farmers, according to Ryan, “built America.” My conversation with Ryan depicts how most farmers view themselves as moral, virtuous individuals—capable and worthy of achievement of the dream. Additionally, Ryan’s comments show how he viewed his occupation intertwined with the American Dream because, for him, the entire premise for the dream is rooted in history of America’s farmers and the Jeffersonian ideal.

The “basic belief in the power and capacity of the individual” molded producers’ ideas of success and what it means to be a “good famer” (Johnson 2015:29). There was a central focus on merit and hard work throughout my time and interviews with producers. Producers believed that what they had achieved was “earned” through their own work

and merit like Kenneth said—even if it was family land passed down over generations or a herd of cattle bequeathed to them by members of their family.

Independents and the American Dream

Leon, a middle aged farmer with two young children, explained to me that he had earned his doctorate of Veterinary Medicine and worked hard to build his cattle herd and farm into its current operating size. Leon repeatedly stressed that he had worked hard for it and created his own opportunities for success. For him, there was a significant moral worth to being able to say that he was “making his own way.” He also told me that he disliked participating in government programs in principle—he didn’t need any help from the government and had problems with people who accepted government assistance. For the independents like Leon, accepting government assistance was outside of their level of comfort because it was not congruent with their belief in their own self-sufficiency as fulfilment of the American Dream of meritocracy—they had merited their own success through their hard work. Achievement of success by individual merit—a hallmark of the American dream—was the focus for independents.

Developers and the American Dream

Developers, conversely, were able to reason their acceptance of government assistance through a differing ideology of success, also rooted in the American Dream. They reason that they are successful because they are examples of the heart of the dream: continual improvement and upward movement on the material and social ladder of success. As they improve their farms and leverage their networks, they also are in the practice of working to accumulate material rewards and social connections. They reason

that they successful and a depiction of the achievement of the American Dream. For developers, their ideology of success is not rooted in individualism, which is the tenet of the American Dream emphasized by the independents, but rather in the pursuit of economic and social standing. Moral virtue for the developers was connected to their economic and social success; there was no loss in moral capital for developers when they opted to participate in government programs. Like Sherman (2009), I found that individuals can fail to achieve economic success, yet due to the way they fail or the fact that they are pursuing it with zeal, they view themselves as successful at the American Dream in terms of virtue because of their choices.

Masculinity

In addition the American Dream, the cattle producers I interviewed for this project's views of success and their corresponding strategies to pursuing and achieving success of were framed and informed by their white rural masculinities. Masculinities are performed. They are "something we practice—something we do" and we "shape it to the specific local contexts that we find ourselves" (Campbell et al. 2006:23). Hence, there is no single rural masculinity; however the producers' performance of masculinity informed their strategies for success (Campbell and Bell 2000).

Developers performed what Bartlett (2006) terms industrialized masculinity, emphasizing the values, behavior, and expected emotional responses of someone who views their role in farming as a hard-working, modern entrepreneur seeking to better their business and profits. Bell, Hullinger, and Brislen (2015) term this a businessman-like, modified version of agrarian masculinity. Russell's explanation helps depict this:

Kelli: Okay. So, I'm really interested in your perspective on what factors help make you successful in that operation?

Russell: Okay. Uh, ooh. As in, like, what outside resources, or?

Kelli: It's however you want to define factors.

Russell: Being that I do not have family resources, I don't have any of that. I've got a lot of close friends out there in farmers in an area that help lend me equipment, help, help me use their resources to be successful. Uh, I have gotten a lot of, a lot of resource from the extension. Uh, just, just knowledge, because I am, in-in-informed, uninformed producer and I'm learning as I go. Uh, being a startup cattle operation, you realize that there's a lot of things you need in farming that you can't buy up front. Uh, so it's good to have friends, and, and resources to help me continue to develop.

Russell places his emphasis on working to “continue to develop” and his use of his network and connections to help achieve his aims. During our conversation he spent a significant amount of time talking about the importance of having a relationship “with a lender that is knowledgeable in what you're trying to do” and how that was his responsibility. His wife, Darla, had just given birth to their second child the week before our interview. Although she is a registered nurse and works as a labor and delivery nurse at a local hospital, Russell noted that through his office manager job combined with work on the farm, he was the chief breadwinner for his family. Russell and other developers emphasized improvements and the use of assets—like their networks or lenders—to help accomplish the cultivation of more material and social rewards while acknowledging that it was a process, not a static achievement.

I found that independents practiced what Barlett (2006) terms an agrarian masculinity—with their values, behavior, and emotional responses centered on the value of independence. Their actions and values depict a masculinity framed around “achievement” of independence. Producers often did this by telling me stories about what someone “like them” would do or not do. Leon told me that someone “like him” cannot accept money from the government. Vernon said that someone “like him” doesn’t choose to pursue help from outside people, groups, or entities. Their small comments were often infused with an emphasis on morality—on how a “good” farmer would do or not do certain things. Paul, Leon, Vernon, and Todd refused to accept the \$10 gift card at the conclusion of the interview—they couldn’t accept a gift from me, a young woman. Vernon told me to “go buy some diapers” with the gift card. These independents were practicing a version of masculinity celebrated in literature and media—the rugged, independent rural farmer or cowboy who is independent and refuses to accept help or assistance from anyone (Campbell et al. 2006).

Regardless of their masculine version of success—industrial or agrarian—producers were still performing dominant, accepted, and celebrated versions of masculinity in the local context (Filteau 2015). The spaces (e.g., organizational meetings, farm offices, supply stores, and cattle auction barns) that producers operated in were largely dominated by men; the power structure and gender order was clearly visible. The majority of the attendees at meetings were men, and men were almost always in leadership positions. While I saw women who work in the agricultural industry facilitate meetings, women bring food for events, and women coordinate event activities—men were always in the positions of leadership, policed the boundaries of who were “real

cattle producers,” and made repeated comments about the role of women in agriculture and at agricultural events.

One of the first statewide agricultural events that I attended in 2016 was a “family dinner” for cattle producers. The dinner was for cattle producers who were in town for the state’s largest livestock show and several agricultural organizations’ annual meetings the next day. While I saw very few children, there were close to 200 adults in the room eating brisket and listening to the band play Alabama hits. Of the attendees, roughly two-thirds were men and everyone except one producer was white. During the middle of the dinner, they had a door prize for attendees. The emcee described how the first door prize was a gift certificate that was redeemable at any feed or tractor store in the state. He then cheekily added—“Basically, *anywhere* but where your wife would want to spend something!” The audience laughed and as he called out the number of the winner, a middle aged woman and well-known registered Santa Gertrudis cattle producer, Barbara, stood up. I asked her later if she minded the emcee’s comments; she told me she hadn’t even noticed it.

As I attended more events, I heard many similar comments that assumed women were not producers. At a regional producers’ meeting, I sat behind William as he discussed potential solutions for problems in the industry. He talked about why solutions were important and stated, “Momma’s not happy if we aren’t making money! ... We need more of us real cattle producers at our meetings!” William’s emphasis on the “we” is an example of him policing the boundaries of who is a “real cattle producer” or not. For him and the rest of the audience (all men), “real cattle producers” farmers were exclusively male and heterosexual.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed multiple other gendering processes and gendered comments. For example at a different regional agricultural event on a slow weekday night, I stopped two women, Fran and Jessica, to ask them about membership. Here is an excerpt from my field notes of that exchange:

After the meeting ended and producers were beginning to walk out to look at the silent auction items for sale, Fran, who is *always* friendly, said, “What can we answer for you?” I replied that I was interested in learning more about their women’s association and the differences between it and their “regular” association. Jessica laughed and said, “Oh, *yeah*, our *women’s* association.” Emily began to speak and then stopped. She then abruptly continued and said, “well, our women’s association used to do product demonstrations, at places like grocery stores. They’d hand out [agricultural products] for people to try. Nobody does that anymore. Now they’re just the decorating committee and you don’t join unless you’re 60, retired, and don’t have anything to do.” I replied and said, “Well, I only had joined the regular association, so I wasn’t sure what my role could be in the women’s association.” Jessica interrupted me and said, “Oh, you know you don’t have to join the regular association? You could have just used your husband’s membership... *You* don’t need one.”

Fran and Jessica’s conversation with me depicts women’s complicit, complementary role in assisting and supporting industrial and agrarian rural masculinity, depicted here in women’s standard role in promoting agricultural products for the association. Additionally, our conversation revealed that women, without institutional

support or legitimacy from their own memberships, lacked clearly defined roles in a noticeably gendered organization.

Barbara, who I mentioned above, was the first elected woman board member in her county agricultural organization in South Mississippi, and she recounted the story to me of how she was elected several years ago. She explained that William, a board member of her county agricultural organization, decided with several other men on the board that after decades of men-only leadership, their county organization needed a woman on the board of directors. William and his peers thought that it would look progressive and helpful politically for their organization to have a woman in a leadership position. After deciding that he wanted to nominate Barbara for the position, Barbara told me that William had lunch with her husband at the local deli to discuss the idea before voting on her nomination. Barbara laughed and told me that she “was okay with it” but didn’t understand how William thought that by doing that he was being “progressive.”

William and the board of directors’ actions depict how they attempted to respond to the outside pressures to make their agricultural organization appear progressive, keeping up with the public’s new interest in who produces their foodstuffs. Barbara implied that she was elected to the position because the agricultural organization wanted to look more like the “family” that they portrayed to consumers and government as they lobbied. William’s comments, Barbara’s experience, and my conversation with Fran and Jessica depict the gendered nature of agricultural organizations and the prevailing hierarchies that shape and support agrarian and industrial masculinity.

The Goal: Being a “Good Farmer”

Everyone I spoke to and spent time with during this project aspired to be a good farmer—a hard-working, successful cattle producer. However, the independents and developers had different definitions of success that were interrelated with two different types of masculinity and focuses of the American Dream. Developers performed industrial masculinity—centered in the hope and progress aspects of the American Dream and worked to further their family finances, farms, and social position through their work in cattle production. Being a “good farmer” is something achieved with progress in the pursuit of external markers—money, esteem, pretty pastures, and quality cattle—for the developers. Developers also often used agricultural organizations—very gendered and hierarchical organizations—to perform, reinforce, and support their industrial masculinity. Independents practiced agrarian masculinity, focusing on the tenet of independence, a part of the American Dream. For the independents, being a “good farmer” is a self-defined achievement, accomplished by doing work “solo” without the help of others. Producers’ differing ideologies of success were associated with their material choices and differing decision making processes when producers consider participating in government farm programs.

Whiteness

Although masculinities and the ideology of the American Dream were important factors that producers drew upon frequently when talking about their farms, families, and success, race was rarely mentioned. Even though producers rarely explicitly mentioned race as a factor in any of their farming endeavors, however, their whiteness shaped and shapes all of their experiences and ideas. In this section, I move to a discussion of how

producers' whiteness shapes their overall orientation towards government farm programs and success in agriculture. First, I focus on how producers' white racial identity was a factor in their understandings of farm programs and shaped their consideration to apply or not apply. Second, I highlight that agricultural organizations were largely white spaces and discuss the implications of racialized nature of the organizations. Finally, I address how both independents and developers used colorblind racial ideology and racial apathy to frame their answers.

During the process of recruiting participants, I asked farmers and individuals that work in agriculture to recommend a cattleman (or several cattlemen) that they knew for me to contact to interview. Of the over 100 recommendations I received from white producers and industry workers, I contacted numerous individuals and scheduled interviews with those that would consent. Of the farmers that I contacted and later interviewed, only one recommendation was a man of color. Daniel, the producer, was recommended by a young, white woman named Emily who worked within the agricultural industry. After interviewing Daniel, I asked Emily why she gave me his name. She replied that "he's a great farmer. He has a nice farm and a beautiful herd of cattle!" I then asked Emily if she considered race when recommending him. She said, "No. You didn't say you wanted a white farmer. Did you only want white farmers?" While I was explicitly recruiting only for white farmers, I did not reveal that during my recruitment. The lack of black farmers mentioned to me as potential recommendations reveals the white producers I met either do not know any farmers of color well enough to recommend them or chose not to recommend any of the farmers of color that they knew.

In addition to asking farmers to recommend other producers for me to interview, I also attended organizational agricultural events with many of the producers that I interviewed. During my fieldwork at these organizational agricultural events, I rarely saw any people of color. At my first event, an agricultural organization's annual dinner for cattle producers in the state, there was only one black farmer attending and no other individuals of color. Other local and regional organizational events were the same—I usually only met and saw only white producers. This differed from my experiences at cattle auction barns, where I regularly met and saw black, white, and Latinx producers.

None of the producers I interviewed were willing to discuss the racial makeup of their organizations. However, I did talk with several individuals who work in the industry that provided me with their perspectives. Allan lives in the Mississippi Delta and works with cattle producers across the state. His business regularly sponsors events for farmers, so I would sometimes see him at meetings. I asked him why there were usually only white farmers present:

Allan: I think a lot of times that we look at the minority farmers and, you know, from our institutions, from my opinion, I know they're under-served. But, I don't know how receptive they are to coming to those meetings and being involved in the organizations that we talked about earlier. You know, I know that I think there's still a negative stigma about those organizations that goes back to the 1940s and 50s, um, when all the civil rights issues were going on. I think that maybe some even personalities that were involved then may have hindered involvement today.

Allan acknowledged the state's history and its legacy. At a different event, I asked Jeffrey, who works in agricultural sales in the state, why no black individuals attended agricultural organization events. He told me that his black coworkers who work in other parts of the state would say that everyone in agricultural organizations in Mississippi are “*ALL* racists” and that the mostly white, dominant agricultural organizations “don't want people of color in them!” Jeffrey talked at length about how Mississippi's history influenced a lack of organizing across racial groups. He also seemed to believe that his coworkers were probably right.

Jeffrey and Allan were correct; the dominant, general, and commodity-specific agricultural organizations in Mississippi are racialized. This is extremely problematic for various reasons; however, for the purpose of this study, I highlight the relationship between networks and organizations. When I asked producers about how they learned of government farm programs—whether they participated in them or not—they told me that they learned about the programs through word of mouth or at an organizational meeting. I asked USDA's statewide outreach coordinator, Chuck Lea, how producers learn about programs and his answer aligned with that of the producers I interviewed. He explained:

Chuck: In most cases, its word of mouth. You know farming communities and farmers *love* to get together and talk you know. The old coffee talk right so word of mouth I would say is our biggest advocate. And then you have people on staff now like myself, outreach coordinator with some experience in the field, that goes around [to organizational events] and you know explains it. Tries to find those who have never served or signed up and show them what we do have to offer. That generates the majority of our new customers. Um but you know we do

advertise through emails, we put radio spots out occasionally depending on what we are announcing. Newspaper obviously is big and if we have a sign up period going on say for WRE, we will run it in the paper and give dates and times and you know websites where you can go and get information um to where or what I county office you need to go to and sign up. The newspaper is big. I would say the biggest, though, is word of mouth for sure.

From USDA's perspective, word of mouth is the strongest avenue of knowledge for programs. Later in our conversation, after I asked about the role of organizations, Chuck stated:

Chuck: ...within our outreach plan we have a list of active community based organizations that are basically another arm of me as an outreach coordinator that are setting up and putting on multiple meetings a year before.... You know, you see [a farmer get approved for] a program or practice and its simply because of that relationship with these groups and it got started *years and years ago* because of somebody you know had a good experience with NRCS and just grew form there. Those organizations are as *vital* to our operation as you know Congress is to the farm bill you know without somebody on the ground. I mean, we don't have the man power to go out and cover the kind of ground that just reaching out to these organizations and these group members like cattlemen's and telling them 'say look, tell them about us; we tell them about y'all, you know.' So we want farmers to sign up to be in the cattlemen's association or the state forestry commission or you know committee you know anybody that you can get that is going to work together from their side up and us to their side. I just [think that]

they're critical, I would say, in us putting on our programs and helping us get the word out for sure.

As Chuck outlines and producers told me during my interviews, producers learn about the programs through their networks or their participation in agricultural organizations.¹¹

From my fieldwork and recruitment, I found that producers' networks and the agricultural organizations that they are members of are almost exclusively white.

Unlike farmers of color, historically, white producers have not faced the same challenges when applying for farm programs (Pennick and Gray 2006; Reynolds 2002). When I asked white producers why they chose not to pursue farm programs, not a single one told me that they weren't aware of farm programs or had heard of family members or friends having traumatic, racialized experiences. This is direct contrast to the experiences of farmers of color who often are not aware of the programs or have heard so much negative discussion around farm programs that they opt not to pursue them (Daniel 2013; Hossfeld, Rico Mendez, and Russell 2018). The composition of white producers' networks and the agricultural organizations that they are a part of shaped their perspectives on farm programs and their access to information about farm programs.

Certainly, dominant ideas about how race works in society, or racial ideologies, operate alongside the ideology of the American Dream (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Hochschild 1995; Omi and Winant 2015). For some of these producers, for example, race was never

¹¹ Black farm organizations have been extremely successful in sharing information, research, and best practices (Reynolds 2002). However, the majority of black farm organizations lack the access and connections to federal legislators to shape farm policy (Daniel 2013; Siby 2013). Excluded from the decision making process, the segregated nature of the farm lobby negatively impacts producers of color and recreates inequality within the agri-food system through the lobbying and policymaking process (Schultz and Perry 2017)

explicitly mentioned throughout the interviews unless I specifically asked a question related to the concept or about historically underserved producers in agriculture. Several producers, like Kenneth, were curt in their replies when asked about race:

Kelli: The Census of Agriculture data show that women and minorities receive less funds from farm programs than other groups. Why is this?

Kenneth: I don't want to get too far into that, because it's not a big ax for me to grind, but since we're on the subject, that's just *wrong*. Because there is a lot of money wasted there, where there, you know, where one segment of the population gets so much more than another segment because of what happened 20 years ago or a 150 years ago. So, so I'll hush on that. Ask me another question.

Kenneth didn't avoid the question or pause at any point in his answer. He abruptly answered me with a matter-of-fact statement about his disagreement with the programs, arguing instead for a colorblind approach to federal policy. Kenneth was opposed to any policy or program explicitly mentioning race. He disagreed with programs or marketing efforts that targeted farmers of color. He also viewed monies dedicated to programs for farmers of color as "wasted." Although Kenneth did quickly answer my question without hesitation, he also refused to give a detailed answer. Gordon responded in an almost identical manner when I asked him the same question:

Gordon: Lot of people get [farm program money] that really don't deserve it. I mean, ugh, I'm just gonna leave it alone.

Roger echoed Gordon and Kenneth:

Roger: I don't think it's fair. You know, it needs to be to the working producer, one that's trying to make a dollar. That fellow, I've seen some minorities, up there

next to me, that, they don't try to improve anything, but they got a brand new fence around there, practically, cost probably \$10,000, and they won't sell \$10,000 worth of cattle in ten years, you know! (laughs) That's the way it is, and then, that's not fair to the man that's really trying to work and make a living at it. Roger's answer depicts how he saw the programs as unjust and he implies that farmers of color aren't men who are "really trying to work to make a living." Collectively, these producers' answers reflect the frames of colorblind ideology—abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism—as described by Bonilla-Silva (2018). A racial frame is one that "provide the intellectual road map used by rulers to navigate the always rocky road of domination and...derail the ruled from their track to freedom and equality" (Bonilla-Silva 2018:54). Producers used the frames of colorblind racism interchangeably to explain and justify their positions opposing farmers of color's use of programs or the development of programs that specifically targeted women and farmers of color.

While Kenneth, Gordon, Roger, and some of the producers were quick and concise in their replies, others stumbled through their answers with long pauses and failed to answer the question. I spoke with Harold and asked him about why women and farmers of color receive less funding on average from the USDA:

Harold: I don't think they're fair at all because we have proven that. If they, they're, if, if, the, the, the groups that, that were, that were participating tonight are in their 60's and 70's well they've been getting the same as everybody the last 30 years. So, you know, their, their points now for what happened to their grandfather that doesn't (stops talking).

Harold avoided my question and focused on USDA's targeting of programs specifically for women and farmers of color. Like Harold, Ryan stammered through an answer. Ryan, normally a very articulate speaker, exhibited racial apathy as he concluded a rambling answer in response to my query about his ideas about why women and farmers of color receive less farm program funding with, "I don't know why that could be."

The white producers that I met with seemed not to "notice" race unless it was to criticize USDA's programs that assist producers of color. Otherwise, they acted oblivious to any notion of race and curious as to why I would be interested in their thoughts on historically underserved producers' use of government farm programs. I asked Patrick questions about women and farmers of color's use of programs, and instead of answering the specific question, he instead talked about his ideas about young and beginning farmer programs. Across both groups of producers—the developers and the independents—they all framed their answers using colorblind racial ideology and racial apathy. Their responses clearly depicted along racialized lines their perceptions of the boundaries of who was worthy and not worthy for federal assistance.

Summary of Findings

Overall, in this study, I found that white men who work as cattle farmers in Mississippi are not a homogenous group with respect to their views on what it means to be a "good" or "successful" farmer. This seems to be at least part of the reason why some Mississippi cattle producers pursue government farm programs while other outright reject such participation. The producers who pursue government farm programs, the developers, opt to participate in government farm programs because being a "good farmer" means continually improving the farming operation and leveraging assets to

accomplish improvements. Federal farm programs provide opportunities for developers to improve their farms. Independents, conversely, define being a good farmer as one who is self-sufficient. Accepting government assistance would mean sacrificing their ability to do things their way and their ability to take pride in accomplishing their work by themselves.

Although they define what it means to be a good farmer differently, both groups of producers highlight the importance of hard work. They all adhere to the ideology of the American Dream and view their own success as examples of meritocracy in action. Their different approaches to government farm programs and differing definitions of success, however, depict how producers perform variations of dominant masculinities—agrarian and industrial—and that those performances correspond with the ideology of the American Dream. However, even though there are important ideological differences between these farmers with respect to their overall orientations toward the American Dream, ultimately, these men are all situated in positions of privilege given their race and gender.

This research shows how white Mississippi cattle producers reinforces what we already know—the power of the ideology of the American Dream, the power of whiteness, and the power of masculinities. It depicts how white individuals often do not see their race and gender as formative in their decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the ways that people understand themselves and their own position in the world influences their choices.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this project, I worked to understand how Mississippi cattle producers navigate the various structures in their daily lives and make choices about their farming operations. I sought to answer the research question: “How do Mississippi cattle producers portray their decisions to pursue (or not pursue) government farm programs?” and learn more about how producers conceptualize success. After conducting 289 hours of participant observation and 33 interviews with producers, I learned that white producers’ conceptualization of success and what it means to be a “good farmer” shaped their decision to apply or not apply for government farm programs.

Developers—those that apply for government farm programs—opt to participate because they view government farm programs as solutions for uncertainty, efficiency, and as a way to increase profitability. Developers ease the tension between participating in a government subsidized farm program through their ideology of success. Developers’ ideology of success is rooted in premise (and hope in) the economic and social success tenet of the American Dream and shaped by an industrial version of rural masculinity. For developers, there is moral virtue in the pursuit of success that trumps the use of government programs. While developers emphasize their hard work in pursuit of success and improvement as key factors, formal organizations and informal networks are central components of developers’ pursuit of success and strategy making.

Independents—those that do not apply for government farm programs—opt not to participate because they see those programs as problematic “free money” and/or do not want to work with the federal government because it is too much of a “headache.” Moral virtue, for the independents, is rooted in their individualistic ideology of success. Independents’ ideology of success and what it means to be a “good farmer” is rooted in the tenet of individualism from the American Dream and shaped by an agrarian version of rural masculinity that emphasizes independence. Independents do not see themselves as benefiting from organizations or any social ties: “good” farmers as those that go it alone.

Developers and independents had the same aim—being a good farmer—however they drew on differing ideologies of success to craft their vision of a good farmer and made divergent choices about the use of government farm programs. Unmentioned throughout my time with producers, but glaringly apparent during my fieldwork, were the wages of whiteness and the racialized and gendered nature of most agricultural organizations. Because masculinities and the American Dream are shaped by race, it is important to note that the developers and independents’ white racial identities were central in framing their conceptualizations of the American Dream and white rural masculinities (Campbell and Bell 2000; Hochschild 2016).

Because this a small study of only white cattlemen in Mississippi, there are multiple directions for future research. First, future research could focus on the role of racializing and gendering processes in agricultural organizations, examining how inequalities are created and sustained through those processes. Second, future studies could consider the perspectives of farmers of color and women producers, concentrating

on differences within and between the groups of producers. Third, new projects could consider white, male producers' perspectives outside cattle production—considering potentially other producers such as those that work in aquaculture or poultry in Mississippi.

America's farmers are viewed as a monolithic group, with the stereotypical image of the farmer being a middle aged white male. Although usually lumped together, white producers are not a homogenous group. I worked to understand the differences between Mississippi cattle producers and how they conceptualize success. My findings show how dominant white masculinities, whiteness, and the ideology of the American Dream shape producers' views of success and their strategies for pursuing it.

Any work in understanding and working to reduce inequalities in agriculture must first begin with an understanding of the perspectives of all producers, especially those in positions of power and influence. In this work, I aimed to contribute a small portion to a growing body of literature on the ideologies used by white producers in the United States, helping us have a better understanding of white farmers and the role of the ideology of the American Dream, whiteness, and masculinity in their use of government programs.

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APPENDIX A
SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Tell me your story—how did you get involved in farming?

Why do you farm?

What are the biggest factors that help you farm and “be a farmer” today?

Tell me about what agricultural groups you are involved in?

Why are you involved or not involved?

Do you serve or have you served in any leadership roles?

Have you ever considered applying for any USDA programs?

Yes

Tell me about that experience.

What is your opinion on why you were you approved?

No

Why not apply?

Why don't more farmers apply for farm programs?

The Census of Agriculture data shows that women and minorities receive less funds from farm programs than other groups. Why is this?

What advice would you give to others who want to farm or do currently farm?

What advice did you get from others?

Who do you give advice to?

What do you wish non-farmers knew about farmers and farming?

What does respectability mean to you?

What are your goals for your children?

Can I contact you again if I have any additional questions?