

A Phenomenological Inquiry into Producers' Experiences Growing Organic Produce

Abstract

Global population growth necessitates increasing food production while reducing the environmental impact of intensive agriculture. Organic production can address this need; however, organic producers lack the Extension support needed to advance their practice. Using phenomenological design, we explored how organic producers experience growing organically. We report factors relevant to producers' decision to grow organically, their experiences with adopting organic practices, and the alignment of their philosophical stances with the concept of growing organically. Participants would benefit from Extension programs targeted toward organic agriculture. We propose an Extension model to support producers in becoming more effective and efficient at growing organically.

Keywords: [Extension](#), [organic agriculture](#), [committed](#), [pragmatic](#)

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Introduction

Global population growth necessitates increasing food production while reducing the environmental impact of conventional agricultural practices (Velten, Leventon, Jager, & Newig, 2015). Organic agricultural practices are an alternative to conventional methods and hold the promise of reducing agrochemical inputs and improving the quality of soils and nutrient value of foods (Oluwasusi, 2014). Organic agricultural practitioners seek to integrate three main objectives into their work: (a) contribute to environmental sustainability, (b) achieve economic profitability, and (c) promote social and economic equity.

Major challenges facing organic producers center on a lack of sufficient, appropriate, and relevant research, educational programs, and Extension support (Agunga & Igodan, 2007; Crawford et al., 2015). Those undertaking interventions to support organic producers have addressed producers' motivations and categorized producers according to economic and social variables that influence decision making at the farm level (Fairweather, 1999). In the research reported here, we addressed the philosophical stances and experiences of producers in northern Georgia related to their decision to grow organically. On the basis of our findings, we propose an Extension model to support producers in becoming more effective and efficient in growing organically.

Purpose Statement

Our purpose was to use a phenomenological research design to identify and describe organic producers' philosophical stances and experiences related to their decision to grow organically.

Reflexivity

Our first author is from Brazil, where she spent time at her grandparents' small-scale organic farm. She earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural engineering and a master's degree in agricultural and environmental education. She is currently a PhD student in horticulture at the University of Georgia. The study reported here was part of her master's thesis work.

Review of Literature

Industrialization of agriculture in the 1940s brought concerns such as exhausted soils, lack of organic amendments, and improper use of chemicals (Treadwell, McKinney, & Creamer, 2003). Organic agriculture—defined by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) (2018) as a production system that sustains healthy soils and ecosystems and relies on ecological processes, biodiversity, and cycles adapted to local conditions—gained prominence with the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which addressed the concerns of industrial agricultural practices.

Since the time of the Brundtland Report, the popularity of growing organically has increased. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) (2017) reported that sales nationally from USDA Certified Organic production increased to \$7.6 billion in 2016, up 23% over 2015 sales. Also, from 2015 to 2016 the number of certified organic farms increased 11% to 14,217 and the number of certified organic acres in production increased 15% to 5 million ac. Despite such increases, USDA Certified Organic farms represent less than 1% of total agricultural land in Georgia (Georgia Organics, 2018).

Organic producers have the option of aligning their operations with an accredited certification body. To obtain organic certification from the USDA, producers must follow USDA regulations and subject their operations to formal inspections. Similar to the USDA, Certified Naturally Grown (CNG) (2018), a private nonprofit organization, confers a certification based on disallowance of the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). CNG relies on peer inspections versus inspections by state entities or certifying agents. The process of obtaining CNG certification is less bureaucratic and expensive than that for obtaining USDA certification, making it an attractive option for smallholder producers. Many producers who grow organically in Georgia have CNG certification or do not hold any certification but still follow organic practices.

Previous research on producers' choice to practice organic agriculture has indicated that the decision often centers on health, safety, and environmental quality over profitability (Burton, Rigby, & Young, 1999; Cranfield, Henson, & Holliday, 2010; Naspetti, Bteich, Pugliese, & Salame, 2016). Burton et al. (1999) reported, "Any analysis of the motivations for adopting organic techniques which confines itself to farm-level financial measurement may be missing important factors" (p. 62). Producers have reported lifestyle preferences, concerns about the environment, and concerns about sustainability of food systems as primary motives for growing organically (Burton et al., 1999). Furthermore, the transition to organic practices can be

influenced by producers' positions in society; skills; access to resources; and traits, such as curiosity, flexibility, creativity in exploring innovative marketing approaches, and willingness to take risks (Darnhofer, Schneeberger, & Freyer, 2005; Morshedi, Lashgarara, Hosseini, & Najafabadi, 2017).

Pietola and Lansink (2001) addressed the economic factors influencing producers' choice to grow organically. Economic factors that led to the adoption of organic practices included large land areas and opportunities to practice differing farming technologies, farms located in low-yield regions, low returns on standard farming, and income-neutral policy reforms. The authors recommended assessing noneconomic factors in future research (Pietola & Lansink, 2001).

Previous research also has addressed challenges and barriers producers face when adopting organic practices. Cranfield et al. (2010) found that challenges and barriers were related to management and production processes while converting to organic and after obtaining certification, marketing, financial factors, and infrastructure. Middendorf (2007) summarized challenges perceived by organic producers as relating to production, marketing, education and awareness, and practical models. These challenges were comingled with a lack of organic expertise regarding inputs, production, processing, marketing, weed control, time management, labor, and certification (Middendorf, 2007).

Organic producers also reported negative pressure from conventional producers and farm groups when adopting organic practices (Cranfield et al., 2010), raising questions of social acceptance of organic agricultural practices. Burton et al. (1999) suggested that within the organic community, producers opt for informal networks to support one another in creating communities of practice that affirm their choice to farm organically.

Conceptual Framework and Research Methods

Fairweather (1999) found that organic producers can be categorized into two groups according to their philosophical stances and associated reasons for deciding to grow organically: committed and pragmatic. Committed producers base their choice to grow organically on a philosophical ideal related to environmental responsibility, human health, and lifestyle (Fairweather, 1999). In contrast, pragmatic producers seek alternatives to conventional farming systems and perceive organic farming as a good prospect for securing income (Fairweather, 1999). On the basis of this conceptual framework, we used phenomenological research methods (van Manen, 2014) to collect and analyze data, seeking to capture the "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences" of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). The phenomenon we addressed was producers' pursuit and implementation of organic farming.

Participants were selected because they followed organic practices as defined by IFOAM (2018) and had growing operations located in north Georgia. Seven growers agreed to participate in the study.

We took the following steps to collect and analyze data:

- Identify and describe the phenomenon of interest.
- Collect data from participants using in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Specifically, we asked participants two main questions: What was your decision-making process for pursuing organic practices? How have you experienced the adoption of organic practices?

- Transcribe the interviews verbatim, and share the transcriptions with participants for verification (member checking) (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
- Identify through coding and memoing significant statements from the transcripts to gain an understanding of participants' experiences.
- Apply the conceptual framework to classify producers according to their philosophical stances and associated reasons for deciding to grow organically.
- Cluster the significant statements into themes, thereby facilitating our ability to draw conclusions through a composite description of producers' experiences based on their classifications (van Manen, 2014).
- Conduct peer debriefing between ourselves to ensure validity of the research process by minimizing researcher biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board approved the study. To address credibility and validity, we engaged participants in the research process. No participants changed their statements, indicating validity of the reported findings. We assigned participants pseudonyms to protect their privacy and included their quotations in our findings to establish truth-value.

Findings

We identified 121 significant statements in the interview transcripts, which we clustered into three themes. We considered producers' classifications (committed or pragmatic) when analyzing the themes to determine how each type of producer experienced growing organically. Our findings are framed within the three themes, which focus on producers' decision-making processes regarding pursuing organic practices, their experiences with adopting organic practices, and the alignment of their philosophical stances with the experience of growing organically.

Overall, producers chose to use organic practices on the basis of their unique situations and positions within the market. Participants' operation sizes, production types, certification types, and producer categorizations are displayed in Table 1. Participants who viewed organic practices as consistent with a philosophy of life and as an aspect of a social movement valued their beliefs above a profit motive. We classified those producers as committed organic producers. Participants who viewed organic agricultural practices as a way to add economic value to their businesses were classified as pragmatic organic producers.

Table 1.

Participant Operation Size, Production Type, Certification Type, and Producer Category

Participant	Operation size (acres)	Production type	Certification type	Producer category
"Ana"	<5	Eggs, vegetables	CNG	Committed
"Ben"	<5	Mushrooms	CNG	Pragmatic
"Carol"	<5	Herbs	CNG	Committed
"Eli"	<5	Vegetables	CNG	Committed

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"Max"	<5	Vegetables	CNG	Pragmatic
"Neil"	<5	Hydroponic vegetables	None	Committed
"Sam"	<5	Eggs, flowers, fruit, herbs, vegetables	CNG	Committed

Note. CNG = Certified Naturally Grown.

Theme 1: Factors Associated with Producers' Decisions to Grow Organically and Obtain Certification

Land access was one factor related to participants' interest in growing organically. Ana, Ben, Carol, and Max inherited land that had been owned within their families for several generations. Additionally, inorganic inputs had never been used on their lands; therefore, converting to organic production was seamless. Having access to family-owned land that was free of chemicals encouraged them to adopt organic practices. For example, Ana said, "The main reason that I wanted to grow organically was because I grew up with grandparents who were stellar farmers. I want be a good steward of this property that we live on, which is a treasure." Eli, Neil, and Sam reported having personal interest in growing organically; however, they did not inherit their land, rather they purchased it. They reported that the process of acquiring land was difficult as there were limited educational resources related to accessing land for small-scale organic production.

The ability to secure necessary financial resources was another important factor producers considered when determining whether to grow organically. Eli noted, "It is hard to do this without initial capital. To get some specific loans, you are required to have at least 2 years of managing or owning a farm, so you have to function bleeding money and losing time for 2 years to get any assistance." Ana and Sam each had received a grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Although obtaining the original grant had not been difficult, Ana complained about delays in the administrative process for securing additional grants. At the time of our study, Ben and Eli each were in the process of applying for a grant for the first time. Neither Carol nor Neil had applied for a grant.

The producers also had to make decisions about whether to become certified organic growers. All but Neil had obtained CNG certification. The producers reported that obtaining CNG certification was easy. However, none of them held USDA organic certification due to cost and bureaucratic barriers. Although almost all the producers had obtained CNG certification, their reasons for doing so differed. In fact, Ana, Carol, Eli, Neil, and Sam, all committed producers, reported that following organic practices was more important to them than becoming certified. Carol was raised on an organic farm and consumed organic products. About gaining CNG certification, she said, "I thought that it would be a really great way to continue my way of life and get some legitimacy to it." When asked about his decision to obtain CNG certification, Ben indicated that the primary reason he had done so was to sell his produce at farmers' markets. In north Georgia, producers are required to be certified, either via CNG or the USDA, to sell at farmers' markets. Ben also noted that he wanted to participate in farmers' markets as a way to meet consumers and other producers and to market his company. Participating in farmers' markets offered the producers the opportunity to create networks with other producers and with consumers. The producers experienced support from other members of the organic community, thereby garnering positive reinforcement for growing organic.

Theme 2: Producers' Experiences with Adopting Organic Practices

All participants learned how to grow organically from firsthand experience, notably with no support from Extension. Eli said, "The biggest challenge is how to fight diseases, pests, and weeds when you are just starting on new land." Max, Neil, and Sam said that organic production was challenging because it took time and effort to develop a strong knowledge base in the topic without support. They all expressed an interest in being served by Extension and were willing to adapt their production to overcome perceived barriers. Specifically, Eli stated, "There are not enough resources for organic farmers from Extension. A lot of training is geared toward conventional and big agriculture."

Each participant described financial factors consistent with his or her committed or pragmatic stance. Committed growers struggled with establishing marketing strategies and creating profitable enterprises because profit was a secondary motivation for them. They reported that even if their organic businesses were to fail, they would not use conventional methods. Carol stated, "I did not look into the finances of growing or marketing. When I got into the CNG, I just knew that I wanted a better way to eat for myself and others. I wanted to share the love." Sam acknowledged that conventional crops grown on a small-scale were not feasible and that organic crops returned 10 times more profit per acre. The compensatory payments attracted pragmatic producers to grow organically as well. Moreover, the pragmatic growers had well developed marketing strategies as income was their primary motivation for growing.

Theme 3: Effects of Producers' Philosophical Stances on Their Production Decisions

How each producer experienced growing organically aligned with his or her stance, either committed or pragmatic, consistent with the literature (Fairweather, 1999).

A committed philosophy was paramount to five growers as they sought a lifestyle that included environmental stewardship and a desire to leave a legacy. Sam said, "It has always been my philosophy of life, and I would say that conventional agriculture would never fit into that lifestyle." Committed producers reported valuing improving natural resources by using organic inputs to minimize environmental damage and ensuring that resources would be available for future generations. The need to be environmental stewards contributed to their decision to adopt organic practices as they wanted to produce food sustainably.

Pragmatic producers perceived organic production as an opportunity to market produce locally and increase sales and profits. When asked about his decision to pursue organic practices, Max said, "At first, it basically came down to a decision; we were on the fence. We could go organic or, in this case, CNG right away. Alternatively, we could go with conventional farming. My thought was [this]: I can do organic and learn a lot, and I can always do the other side if things fail." For Ben as well, health and sustainability aspects were not motivators for growing organically. He said that he grew organically because his crop (mushrooms) did not require the use of chemicals or involve GMOs, but he indicated that he would apply such tactics if doing so were profitable. He said, "As long as it is natural, I do not see a need in going totally organic. I do not really have a problem with GMOs either. If we could use nature to our benefit, why not?"

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Participants in our study reported not receiving support from Extension. This finding is consistent with the literature as many studies have shown that Extension efforts have not extended to the organic agricultural

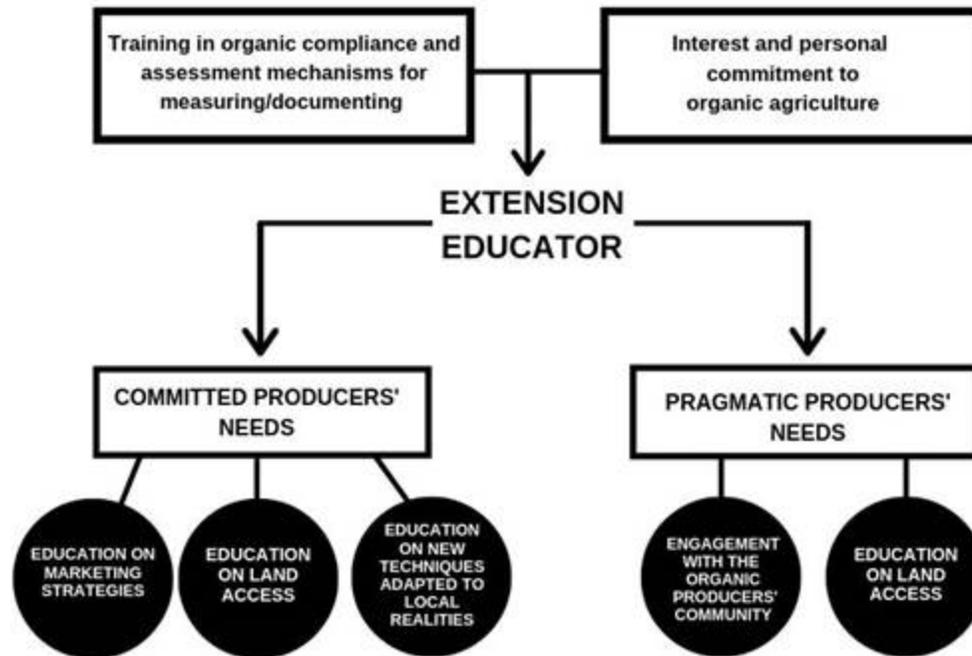
sector (Crawford et al., 2015; Lillard, Parker, & Sundermeier, 2013; Middendorf, 2007). Agunga and Igodan (2007) reported that organic agriculturalists have a strong interest in Extension and are willing to pay for Extension services; however, such producers think Extension agents do not know enough about organic agricultural practices and do not understand their needs well enough to be helpful. Our findings suggest that organic producers from north Georgia would benefit from more Extension programs targeted toward organic agriculture. Extension experts act as change agents (Rogers, 2003) who play a role in clients' adoption decisions and provide effective communication about new technologies; therefore, developing Extension programs targeting organic producers could stimulate growth in this sector.

We classified organic producers into two categories, committed and pragmatic, according to variables that influenced their philosophical stances and decision-making processes regarding growing organically (Fairweather, 1999). Figure 1 illustrates an Extension model to support organic producers. The model represents the following findings and recommendations:

- Extension agents are advised to increase their interest in and professional commitment to organic agriculture by increasing their knowledge regarding organic compliance and assessment mechanisms to help both committed and pragmatic producers comply with CNG policy and regulations.
- Committed producers were motivated to grow organically by their philosophical ideals. Because profit was not a top priority, marketing was a challenge for these producers. They would benefit from learning marketing strategies to address economic vulnerability and financial oscillations. Additionally, committed producers who do not inherit land, and even those who do, may need more education on land access. Finally, committed producers expressed willingness to adapt their production to overcome a number of barriers; therefore, they need help from Extension to learn about agricultural techniques adapted to their local conditions.
- Pragmatic producers were motivated to grow organically for profitability. They sought to achieve profits by reducing expenses, including expenses for chemical inputs. They appreciated the skills required for growing organically and were challenged intellectually by doing so. Generally, they were informed about marketing strategies and techniques to increase profits. Pragmatic producers need more training in community engagement to capitalize on community knowledge. According to Rogers (2003), the structure of a social system can hinder the diffusion of an innovation; therefore, Extension could better serve pragmatic producers by facilitating their inclusion in the organic community so that they may engage with other producers to exchange knowledge. Like committed producers, pragmatic producers also need more education on land access.

Figure 1.

Model for Extension Agents to Better Serve Committed and Pragmatic Organic Producers



Additional support from Extension is necessary to stimulate the organic sector's growth. Classifying organic producers according to committed and pragmatic stances is important for developing future Extension programs as these two groups have different needs. Our model can serve to inform outreach efforts that are based on organic producers' philosophical stances. As with any qualitative research, the findings of our study are not generalizable. However, they do offer insights into what influences north Georgia organic producers' decisions for adopting organic practices and how they experience growing organically.

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