

Cooperation among farmers through the lens of their future orientations: A case study from Slovenia

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Abstract

Rural areas across Europe are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of farming practices, value systems, and visions of the future. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of rural areas should eventually come together and work together, as agricultural policy based on scientific research encourages their joint participation through various measures and initiatives. In order to understand the relationship between the past and present, the current limits of cooperation and to anticipate change, the present article categorises (market) cooperation practices among farmers as a possibility, potentiality, and disposition. The study was conducted in the Pomurje region of Slovenia and was based on occasional field visits and six months of participant observation between March 2018 and March 2020. More than 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The results suggest a link between bad past experiences, farmers' passivity and perpetuation of power relations, leading to rare and fragile visions of cooperation as a possibility. Moreover, cooperation potential usually does not manifest itself at all, or it is blocked and fails. Nevertheless, some collaborations are considered desirable, especially for new and young farmers. The study has revealed many reasons why some forms of cooperation are almost impossible for the interlocutors and presents a new perspective on farmer collaboration by examining farmers' future orientations to assess their belief in the collective future and their capacity for change.

KEYWORDS: farmers' cooperation, future orientation, possibility, potentiality, disposition

Introduction

The anthropological research interest in the future has gained importance in recent years. Although the future has always been present, be it in the early theories of (social) continuity and (cultural) change or in the debates on linear and cyclical understandings of time in the 1980s and 1990s, until recently there have been no real attempts to formulate the future as a subject in its own right (Ringel & Moghaddari, 2020). Anthropology traditionally focuses on the past and present of a social system, and its methods are embedded in past orientations. Nevertheless, with its critical core, ethnographic origins, and ability to deal with the world and people from a moral perspective, anthropology has the potential to provide high-quality research into futures that sustains a present perspective by addressing contemporary cultural trends, fears, hopes, and other future orientations (Salazar et al., 2015; Strzelecka, 2013).

People cannot experience the future directly, but they can create, understand, and make it almost tangible in the present (Strzelecka, 2013). As Appadurai (1996; 2013) has argued for decades, the imagination should be seen as quotidian energy, as it is a vital resource in social processes and projects. To stimulate anthropological research on the indeterminate and open-ended teleologies of everyday life across scales of future imaginings, Bryant and Knight (2019a) use the concept of “orientations”, introduced in detail in the next chapter. Future orientations in 21st-century anthropological research have received the most attention through the circumstances in which hope and anticipation arise and anticipate change (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Stephan & Flaherty, 2019; Strzelecka, 2013).

Future perspectives in rural studies indirectly arise in the context of farmers’ risk management, increasing rural heterogeneity, and sustainable agriculture. Ploeg and his colleagues (2009) saw the increasing diversity of farming practices and institutions as agriculture’s most important asset and a response to the uncertain future. In addition, social perceptions of food production and environmental sustainability in rural areas are also becoming increasingly diverse and intense (Ahnström et al., 2009). According to Persoon and Est (2000), in the sustainability debate, people act from highly divergent time-scapes and have very different visions of the future and future images for today’s behaviour. These findings suggest that to understand the past and present dynamics of interpersonal relationships better, researchers should focus more explicitly and continuously on the future of people in rural areas.

Many challenges in agriculture, from conservation to financial stability of the agricultural sector and the need for innovation, are addressed through proactive and collective approaches (Tregear & Cooper, 2016). Various forms of collaboration between farmers

and other stakeholders are often presented as the preferred future (change) in policy documents, research and agricultural practice. Therefore, this paper discusses future orientations for four forms of market cooperation (cooperative, producer organisation, local brand, and local shop) between farmers from Goričko and its immediate surroundings, an area within the Slovenian region of Pomurje (Goričko is the northern part of the region within Slovenia's borders with Austria and Hungary). Private initiatives for cooperation under one brand or in the farm shop are now trending upward, producer organisations do not yet exist, but their establishment is encouraged by the European Union agricultural support system, while cooperatives are rare in Pomurje. There is no active cooperative or any other form of farmers' market organisation in Goričko, although there have been several attempts to improve market cooperation and the integration of farmers (Rac et al., 2020).

This article focuses on the past-present-future relationship, while a starting point is the future orientations of the interlocutors regarding their formal agricultural cooperation in the region. Thus, the study originally follows the efforts of other anthropologists (see Salazar et al., 2015; Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Ringel & Moghaddari, 2020) in the application of future-oriented theoretical and methodological research techniques and interventions as part of an anthropological agenda (Salazar et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the article considers cooperation as a possibility, potentiality, and disposition. The choice of future orientations was chosen in order to a) reinterpret past and present relations and events through the perception of cooperation as a possibility, b) understand current limitations through the perception of cooperation as a potentiality, and c) anticipate changes through the perception of cooperation as a disposition.

The article attempts to assess whether cooperation can be a possibility or a desirable future in an area of choice to meet the challenges of sustainability and market competitiveness in rural areas. It also tries to establish whether the conception of farmer collaboration contains the potential for change and whether it has been or will be realised. It looks at the lived experience of anticipating cooperation and possible ambiguities and ambivalences it reveals. The analysis attempts to establish what future disposition for formal cooperation have farmers developed based on their experiences and expectations, what they expect from themselves, from other farmers, and the power structures in the area of their cooperation commitment.

The structure of the article follows the triple perception of cooperation in the sections "Theoretical framework", in which selected future orientations are pursued and theorised, and in the sections "Results" and "Discussion", in which reasons for and against

cooperation in the present and future are listed and analysed. The last section offers a synthesis of findings and thoughts on the future approach of rural cooperation.

Theoretical framework

Bryant and Knight (2019a) understand the concept of (future) orientations as a way in which people continually orient themselves to the indefinite teleologies of everyday life. Orientations such as anticipation, expectation, hope, potentiality, and others stand for different ways in which the future may affect the present. Future orientations can explain but also shape a person's present relationships, behaviour, reasons for action, and inertia. Furthermore, future orientations show how people selectively archive and shape the past and prepare the ground for the future in the present (Bryant & Knight 2019a; Bryant & Knight, 2019b; Persoon & Est, 2000). Therefore, the concept of future orientation can be used not only to examine and better understand the quotidian but also to determine what the possibilities and options for change are and what makes sense for someone to do, believe, or think (Persoon & Est 2000; Schatzki, 2010).

Possibility and preferred future

The future can be seen as a contingent set of possibilities, although there are never endless possibilities (Salazar et al., 2017). In order to see the future as possible, one must engage in prospective/retrospective imaginative processes of action or becoming, which are composed of creative and deliberate foresight (Liisberg et al., 2015; Mische, 2009). People do this by drawing on their previously collected "stock of knowledge" and fantasising about events or conditions that have not happened (Schutz, cited in Mische, 2009). Since the future goes beyond mere visions of possibilities, it generates actions in the present to effect or avoid these visions. Avoiding undesirable futures and realising preferred futures has a strong ethical component (Salazar et al., 2017).

People reflect retrospectively or prospectively on their conduct by comparing themselves with others and judging them, which is an essential part of the ongoing attention work that forms the basis for a judgmental assessment of what future is desirable (Sayer, 2011). A preferred future contains the promise or at least the possibility of a better life (Liisberg et al., 2015). Seeing a desirable future reinforces feelings of uncertainty about the future, accompanied by speculation and hope. These future orientations become a means of pressing into the future by focusing on the possibility of actualising a certain potentiality (Bryant & Knight, 2019a).

Potentiality and anticipation

Potentiality can be conceptualised as the capacity of a future to become an actuality: ‘Present figure, force, or formation is experienced as encompassing coeval and co-existing sources for becoming other than what is immediately present or presented, as containing hidden state(s) that are as yet immaterialised’ (Vigh, 2011, p. 94). Potentiality indicates a latent possibility that is imagined as optional, a quality that is perceived as available for human modification and direction, through which people can work to become or make something completely different from what it is. Although potentiality refers to a faculty or power, one must be prepared for surprises, for potentially it is about the not-yet. Potentiality always implies impotence and shapes the course of human action, and structures relationships in a specific way. In order to realise potential and achieve specific results, people must make decisions within the existing, emerging and future framework of power dynamics. Questions such as whose potential should be realised, why and whose responsibility it is to realise it should be asked and answered. Thus, potentiality is political, working on and through current morality (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Salazar et al., 2017; Taussig et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the sense of reality and potentiality represents the field in which anticipation occurs. Anticipation is the act of looking ahead, drawing the future into the present to lay the foundations for the future (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Stephan & Flaherty, 2019). It plays a decisive and ambivalent role in establishing meanings and orienting actions in the present. Action has the potential to make a certain future possible, even if the most desirable or most probable projected future is the one that is unlikely to come (Fox, 2019; Riner, 1991).

Disposition and expectation

When people are confronted with uncertainty and unpredictability and make their way through the indeterminate situation, they take a stand on a certain disposition towards the future. Disposition is the liability or tendency for something to happen or propensity for doing something; it is a mode of future orientation that includes teleological necessity and openness to the aleatory. A disposition, however, has a (re)oriental effect in two directions by portending a possible future and attempting to forestall it (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Liisberg et al., 2015).

People imagine, among other things, what is “bound”, “supposed” and “ought”. A “bound to” is a part of virtual-actual and expresses something more than hope and a wish but less than necessity, because it takes contingency into account. While “supposed

to” expresses the promise of a requirement imposed by others (Bryant & Knight, 2019a). On the one hand, “ought to” represents a feeling of “should” based on the knowledge that something is likely to happen, is expected or promised (“ought” of promise). On the other hand, it represents a feeling of unfulfilled wish, desire, or possibility, based on expectations that allow us to think about the alterity of the future (“ought” of potentiality). The “ought to” is thus embedded in the expectation.

People expect on the basis of past experiences, although the expectation always contains an uncertainty or the possibility of its undoing (Bryant & Knight, 2019a). Moreover, speculation arises when expectations are shattered, the present becomes eerie, and the endpoint unclear. Speculations about the past, present, and future are based on assumptions and partial information, which means that speculations often turn into (self)deception and influence the state of (un)confidence, future orientation and disposition of people (Bryant & Knight, 2019a).

Farming cooperation and its future

Research (Dias & Franco, 2018; Klerkx et al., 2010) has shown that cooperation activities can be an alternative way of organising and bringing about agricultural innovation and institutional change. Networking of different actors can mobilise and facilitate knowledge sharing. Doing so could lead to the creation of alternative economic areas, the economic viability of producers, better food and environmental quality and the strengthening of social capital (Beckie et al., 2012). Networking producers can enhance their ability to develop market power and economies of scale (Valentinov, 2007). Finally, research (McKenzie et al., 2013) has shown that collaborative agri-environmental programmes could benefit ecosystem services and biodiversity.

European policymakers have recognised the importance and potential benefits of networking and actively promote cooperation between different actors in rural areas and between farmers at social, economic and environmental levels through measures under the Common Agricultural Policy (European Commission, 2014). Following recent diversification and an increasing number of scientific articles and research projects on rural cooperation and long-term planning for the 2021–2027 Common Agricultural Policy period, the networking paradigm will become increasingly important (European Commission 2019).

Since farmers are the main actors implementing adaptation and sustainability policies and practices, authors have called for their motivations and behaviours to be examined

(Feola et al., 2014; Loë et al., 2015). Yacoub and Haddad (cited in Gasson, 1977) wrote as early as 1970 that actors' cognitive variables, such as attitudes and opinions towards co-operation, beliefs and expectations, are important for participation in the cooperative. Researchers have also emphasised that research on collaborative processes should focus on social relations, especially moral norms and the institutions that regulate them (Vladimirova, 2017), and contextual conditions that might facilitate or hinder the desired outcomes of collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Sutherland and Burton (2011), who have studied informal cooperation among farmers in Britain using the concepts of social and cultural capital and the "good farmer", have argued that subsidies that would require all farmers in a given region to cooperate to achieve a particular goal are unlikely to succeed. Their study has shown that even in a small area, farmers have very different and even conflicting management strategies and philosophies, and that farmers may have very good reasons for not cooperating with other (neighbouring) farmers.

Some researchers have mentioned the future orientation through farmers' relations, past experiences, and trust, which is related to factual understanding of past experiences (Lisberg et al., 2015). The issue of trust in exchange relationships has been consistently highlighted in various studies as a key element that allows groups of people to work together and create new opportunities and shared visions for the future (King et al., 2019, Tregear & Cooper, 2016). In the articles on the more-than-economic dimensions of cooperation in food production, Emery et al. (2017) have attributed a similar role to experience. They have highlighted how cooperative and other principles of collaboration between farmers have been reactivated, retaining, and gaining their relevance and transforming relationships in rural communities that function beyond the profit model. Emery and Franks (2012) have identified potential barriers to collaborative agri-environment schemes: lack of mutual understanding and communication among farmers, their cultural need for independence and timeliness, and their conflicting and differing perceptions of risk. They believe that although these potential problems reflect farmers' experiences of working together and participating in agri-environment schemes, they are important because they reflect deeper issues and values and because experiences can shape attitudes towards future behaviour.

The studies presented have highlighted the need to consider the prospects of people who are encouraged to participate through cooperative practices and initiatives. Nevertheless, farmers' cooperative practices, decisions, and behaviours are usually considered only in temporal terms (the history of agriculture, the present situation, and future aspi-

rations are all important) (Riley et al., 2018). L'Estoile's article (2014) stands out. It analyses the diversity of future orientations of former sugarcane workers in Brazil and their strategies to mitigate uncertainty by mobilising personal relationships and resources in different configurations.

Therefore, the paper innovatively explores and presents farmers' future orientations in a collective context, uncovering relevant information about social relations, contextual conditions, and the relevance of past experiences to farmers' beliefs about the collective future and their capacity for change.

Methodology

The research was carried out in the north-easternmost part of Slovenia, in the Pomurje region. Most of the interlocutors came from within the Landscape Park Goričko. The case study location was chosen in an area where the need for increased cooperation between farmers and land use management was identified (Rac et al., 2020). Despite initiatives for formal cooperation between farmers and other stakeholders in a selected rural area, interventions have not been successful and formal cooperation practices are currently rare, although informal cooperation practices in various areas of farm social life still exist (Knežević Hočevar, 2013, 2014).

The research work began in spring 2018 and has not yet been completed. Between several short-term field visits, the long-term participant observation took place from September 2019 to March 2020. Data were collected through personal interviews and field-notes. Follow-up interviews were rarely conducted, although many informal conversations with people already known to the study took place in chance encounters during private social gatherings and various public events.

A total of 52 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The 39 farmers, individuals, spouses or young and older farmers from 29 farms of different agro-industries, orientations and backgrounds were interviewed in formal conversations. In addition to farmers, agricultural advisors, priests, journalists and representatives of local associations and different companies took part in the study. The interlocutors were selected based on snowball samples, starting with the young farmers associated with the work and activities of the Slovenian Rural Youth Association. The association is also a former and still potential promoter of agricultural cooperation in the region. The interviews lasted between half an hour and five hours and were mostly recorded and fully transcribed.

The original research did not focus directly on farmers' future orientations to their cooperative relationships. Rather, the research on which this article is based was broad and ethnographic, examining how farmers, and—to a lesser extent—other rural populations, perceive and understand cooperation in their environments. During the interviews, we discussed (domestic) agricultural practices and the relationship between the generations, functioning and cooperation of the local community, relations with Landscape Park Gorčko and to environmental protection practices, and the formal and informal cooperation between farmers (and agricultural institutions) in the past, present and future.

The article draws on primary and secondary qualitative analyses to explore themes about farmers' past and present collective experiences and emotions, the interpretive meaning of the current state of farming (non) cooperation, and future orientations that were addressed only in small portions of the interviews but also emerged spontaneously in conversation. The interview transcripts were read several times to create excerpts on the mentioned topics. These excerpts were later organised and analysed descriptively, discursively, and hermeneutically according to the theoretical framework on future orientations. In the following sections of the paper, the empirical data and the theoretical interpretations are linked.

Results

Cooperation as a possibility

In my opinion, this (market cooperation) possibility does not exist. Because I do not know how M., a livestock farmer, would cooperate, with what and with whom. (Fruit producer, 2019, p. 14)

The most frequently mentioned possibility was the establishment of (partially) joint activities by farmers to promote, distribute and sell their crops, products and/or services. On the one hand, the desire was expressed to link farmers who differ in the dominant production orientation of farming. In this case, the most vivid possibility was the establishment of a local supply chain. In the opinion of the interlocutors, a major benefit of the activity would be a varied range of products. On the other hand, there were ideas for cooperation between farmers who carry out the same agricultural activities at the primary and secondary levels, for example, the networking of horseradish farmers, fruit growers, wine producers or tourist farms. In this case, the most frequently mentioned possibility was a joint brand. According to the farmers, the most important segment of cooperation within a similar agricultural production would be the provision of sufficient quantities of goods and a better market position in the food chain.

Producers often imagined themselves to be part of a small group of up to ten farmers, usually involved in agricultural processing, who would join in a local private business (i.e., a shop). The latter is becoming increasingly popular among farmers in the region. Four interlocutors have already set up shops on their farm; one is in the process of doing so. The latter was explaining:

Yes, I would like to cooperate in that way. Not with the competition. I certainly would not have fruit and wine in my shop. I have a colleague in mind for cooperation. He deals a lot with cannabis. I think he was the first in the country to start growing cannabis... I would invite him to have a shelf or two... He also received a Prešeren Award for his thesis on cannabis. I have not even mentioned that to him. I do not know if we are going to get tender money or not. (2018, p. 10)

In order to appeal to a wider range of consumers, producers, like the one mentioned above, preferred to invite other farmers whose products complemented the domestic offer. Sometimes they are also looking for interesting and innovative products and contact producers with specific expertise. This type of relationship has the potential for further knowledge sharing and commercial leap, which some producers in the region have already practised.

According to the agricultural adviser, who is also a vintner, producers with a farm shop usually declared their own brand at the same time. Some of them were very successful, but the investments were large. He also expressed concern that the farmers would not be prepared to invest (so much) money if the brands were shared:

The problem is developing a brand and investing money. I do not know... I am saying that one million euros must be invested for a brand to work and be visible. From this point, one could, well, here is the problem... I have been thinking for a long time about establishing a brand, connecting winemakers. I see two, maybe three of them with whom I would dare to make a business. Well, I am not usually the problematic one. The thing has to make sense; you have to see a benefit in it. Everyone has to see a benefit. (2019, p. 9)

All producers who expressed that cooperation between colleagues is possible, and some of whom have not yet considered working with others, created a mind map of suitable and possible partners. The farmer, whose family owns a farm and where they only offer their products, discussed:

Here is only one that produces juice in large quantities, but otherwise, we could find seven or eight juice producers, and we could enter the market together. This is a task for the future. There must be something for the future; otherwise, it is over. (2018, p. 9)

An important element of considering cooperation as a possibility was the existence of viable farms. A strong reason against cooperation was related to past and current abandonment of agricultural land. Several farmers, especially those without the (future) successor, planned to reduce or abandon farming. Some farmers felt that there were not enough similar or comparable farms within the same agricultural production for serious market or technological cooperation at the local level. These concerns were also expressed in the discussions on local cooperatives.

Due to de-agrarisation and the bad experiences of recent decades, there were almost no calls for the (re)establishment of local cooperatives. One of the fruit producers explained:

I do not see cooperation in the way we have done by founding a fruit cooperative as an option. In fruit production perhaps, but that option is over. It will never happen again because of the bad experiences and ... nor are all orchards being restored. (2019, p. 14)

After Slovenia's independence in 1991, which brought with it a loss of Yugoslav markets and the transition to a market economy, all local cooperatives collapsed due to economic problems. Based on the old structures, apple producers founded a local specialised cooperative. After an optimistic start in the 1990s and the construction of a cold storage warehouse in the early years of the 21th century, distrust arose. The producers claimed that payments were unfairly distributed and irregular, while management representatives were confronted with the sale of the members in circumvention of the cooperative.

About the overall experience of the last year of the cooperative's activity and the time after that, one of the leaders said: 'The experience was terrible, hard for me. And there is no way I would like to relive it again' (2019, p. 3).

Although the fruit producers considered the foundation of the specialised cooperative to be good and necessary to ensure ease, security and stability, especially in turbulent times, only one of them expressed the willingness to revive the idea, albeit under the following conditions: 'If a good man comes to the right place, maybe, and gives a good price, okay. Then I would go back' (2019, p. 19). This quote was not the only one that highlighted the lack of intervention. One of the interviewees thought:

It is unlikely that we would integrate (into the market) together. Very unlikely. No man would start it. Then maybe there is a problem within ourselves. And this envy. I do not know, then everything dies. (2019, p. 6)

It seems that the appearance of the "good man" would eliminate the impossibilities of cooperation, but to bring about change, the action of the farmers is also necessary. Local producers are generally unwilling to take the initiative, leadership or responsibility and to invest resources and time in farmers' organisations such as cooperatives or special interest groups. The milk producer answered the question about the possibility of cooperation for lobbying: 'I have no will, otherwise ... I do not care about it at all' (2019, p. 5). Another young farmer said: 'I do not want to take on some big function (in a local association of young farmers), others should take the lead' (2018, p. 3), although he believed that this kind of cooperation would be good for contact with friends, sharing experiences, and applying for tenders together.

The stories about possible and impossible joint activities of farmers make it clear that a fundamental part of considering cooperation as a possibility is recognising a good, suitable and reliable partner with (specialist) knowledge, whose production is large enough to satisfy market demand. According to the interlocutors, partnerships could currently only be achieved in the context of private initiatives, where the initiator/investor/owner reserves the right to choose a partner who meets his expectations of a good partner and successful cooperation. Therefore, the results suggest that only cooperation practices within a private brand or farm shop have a chance to turn into potentiality.

Cooperation as a potentiality

I have tried to connect the producers of pumpkin seed oil; ah... it's not working. (Former farmer & president of cultural association 2019, p. 6)

In Goričko, only one potential for cooperation between farmers was identified, which is not surprising, because: a) cooperation within the cooperative was considered practically impossible, b) some visions of cooperation were postponed to a distant or elusive future and to external encouragement, and c) even those involved in an imaginary process of action in the field of possible cooperation with colleagues expressed concerns about funding. Moreover, the case of potentiality referred to the cooperation of people who moved to the region from other parts of Slovenia and were farming there. One of them said:

Right now, we are making arrangements with V. and another one... to connect with each other a little bit. I would say sustainable agriculture. To connect and then we would have a joint sale (on the internet) or we would even put together some packages... People could come to us, we would be connected, and they could visit our farm and then their farm and buy products... So maybe we would also be interesting for tourists... We have a plan to be connected in this way. (2018, p. 2-10)

Their relationship has the potential to grow into a market cooperation because it does not have a long history; they share the same philosophy of nature-friendly agriculture and they differ from others in their value system, their way of life and their way of thinking. The relationships of natives are much more burdened with emotions, past experiences and events.

However, the interlocutors who were not first-generation farmers mentioned that various ideas of joining together in a small circle of producers to go to the market together with a brand, a shop or another supply channel were always present. As mentioned above, some private actions were successfully put into practice, while many ideas about joint engagement failed to reach potentiality from the outset, although individuals worked towards realising them. Many interlocutors tried to approach others and convince them to cooperate, but they did not succeed or were not persistent enough.

The interviewed members of two farming families attempted to get other producers to follow their ideas for cooperation. One couple developed a concept of setting up a regular transit and selling the harvest and products in the Slovenian capital, but could not find proactive people (2019); the other couple tried to create a joint brand, but could not find a listener, 'neither young nor old' (2018, p. 5), they added. Experiences like these limited both positive anticipation and action. The livestock farmer said he was considering making a joint offer with a butcher and a bread baker. In the end, he decided to drop this option because he believed that, in the end, he would be left alone (2020).

According to the narratives of farmers and other entrepreneurs in the region, the most common reason that hinders the occurrence of potentiality for cooperation between farmers was envy or unwillingness to share the benefits. The wine producer recounted:

Here, for many years there has been a will to build a wine cellar. One said she/he would not sell, why they are selling here... Some of them were "smart" and did not want to go into it. Well, nothing can be done about it. (2019, p. 2)

In line with the results, the crucial point in the process of transforming the possibility of cooperation into a possibility with potential is not only to find a suitable partner but also to provide a critical mass of people working together to realise that potential. When cooperation goes beyond private, unilateral actions, activating just one or a few people may be insufficient. People who are in the process of working together should align their visions of a desirable future for themselves, for other stakeholders and for the group. Potentiality must become a common understanding of the future.

Cooperation as a disposition

Surely [small farmers should work together] in the long term so that they can operate under poor conditions, well, they are not competitive. (Mixed crop-livestock farmer, 2018, p. 5)

The results suggest that the cooperative in the region is considered almost impossible to regain, but a similar type of cooperation should take place sooner or later. In recent years, European Union policy has supported and regulated the establishment of producer organisations and associations of producer organisations. Producer organisations are expected to be efficient for farmers (but also for customers and consumers) as they

offer improved market access, lower transaction costs, a better bargaining position and knowledge sharing, which has been confirmed by researchers and accepted by farmers. This activity is bound to become increasingly important in the future (European Commission, 2018).

According to the business interlocutor, family farms and agricultural business enterprises should set up a producer organisation to meet the policy requirements for getting subsidies and strengthening their market position. It is expected that the enterprise to which the interlocutor belongs will set up at least one and at most three producer organisations in the pig farming, plant production and horticulture sectors within the next six months (2020: 1). While the enterprise is actively preparing for the EU 2021–2027 period of the Common Agricultural Policy, the creation of a producer organisation at the farm level will be much more difficult to achieve. One of the fruit growers, with whom some other farmers agreed, said:

These producer organisations will probably be a necessary evil... In Slovenia, I am sure, this would be very difficult or impossible, mainly because of the presence of large farms on the one hand ... and small farmers on the other. Competition is not in the interests of these large agricultural business enterprises... Only the Chamber (of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia) could do something about it, but even in the Chamber, the large agricultural business enterprises have their representatives with decision-making powers, and nothing will happen. Certainly not. (2019, p. 25)

Although many of the respondents shared the view that farmers in the region are unlikely to work together for common market goals, some of the interviewees felt that family farmers, especially small farmers, should cooperate in the long term if they want to survive in the next decade or so. This opinion was often expressed by the larger farmers in Goričko who owned 50 hectares or more of arable land, and they excluded themselves from these impulses. A mentality like “if you are good and developed enough, you do not need to cooperate” was generally implied. One of the youngest interviewees said: ‘Every farmer cultivates her/his own land, there is no competition, ... everyone works for herself/himself, competition (through cooperation) is not necessary’ (2018, p. 3).

The persistent belief that farmers should work on their own initiative and the recognised future orientation of farmers towards cooperation, including disposition without any real indication of commitment, suggest that there is almost no capacity to aspire for cooperation. Nevertheless, some of the existing cooperation practices in the region and beyond may predict a slow change in the culture and (social) imagination of cooperation among farmers. During the fieldwork, the most vibrant networking activities took place on smaller farms where people lived who did not necessarily have agricultural backgrounds. These new entrants to farming, who had moved from nearby and more remote urban areas to the “real, naturally intact and cheaper” Goričko, needed and wanted to strengthen their economic situation and were looking for end products and distribution channels that were not ubiquitous. Their activities ranged from selling online to collaborating with other newcomers, which was also encouraged by the Landscape Park Goričko by providing a space for them to get to know each other and promoting and showcasing their “good practises” as they shared common views on nature conservation and agriculture.

Discussion

Cooperation as a possibility

The result of the study is that private brands or farm shops are recognised as the only possibility that could also turn into a potentiality. This suggests that joint actions are perceived as an object of uncertainty and loss of control. Thus, inviting colleagues to contribute their final products without further input of money and time serves as a turning away from the realisation of fears and towards a chance of eventually winning in a game of risk within the participation in hypothetical futures (Weszkalnys, cited in Bryant & Knight, 2019). The reasons that people do not behave in a trustworthy manner and are not willing to take the risk of working together for a common goal may, to some extent, be based on the past and present experience and knowledge of the interlocutors, their family members and the wider community (Liisberg, 2015). In the next paragraphs, arguments for clearly negative anticipations and expectations of interlocutors about common formal practices are presented, especially through the present and future orientations regarding interlocutors’ engagement and relationship with cooperatives.

The results show that it would be impossible to create a new cooperative (or producer organisation at the farm level). The interviewees do not believe that things could be different because of past events that ultimately led to an experience of loss and suffering (Liisberg et al., 2015). In the 1990s, they lost very strong sales and employment platforms

with the collapse of cooperatives established in the pre-1991 political system, and in the 2000s, they lost money and trust in other producers and sales intermediaries in their own cooperative initiatives. The younger generation of farmers knows about the bad experiences of their parents, and some of them consider them bad business decisions of their parents and are much more careful when choosing (rare) business partners.

The archive of selective memories offers a map of negotiating and shaping (new) futures (Appadurai, 2013). In the future, there is always the possibility that something unexpected and terrible will happen, but after bad experiences, people cannot believe that something like this will probably not happen; they do not behave in a trusting manner (as before) and are not willing to take (another) risk because they assess the prospects negatively (Liisberg et al., 2015).

Furthermore, as far as the cooperatives in the region are concerned, there is no preparation for the future, only symbols and stories from the past that give orientation, courses of action, and intentions (Bryant & Knight, 2019a), which is why young and other producers have chosen to write themselves out of this kind of future cooperation. They recognise it as being based on mistrust, contempt, and apathy because it is collectively perceived as dangerous (Knight, cited in Bryant & Knight, 2019a). Any return of this past would be directly related to the uncertain future (Bryant & Knight, 2019a). For this reason, the farmers have created a mind map of (im)possibilities for cooperation, focusing positively only on practices such as private brands and stores where they can retain autonomy and control.

In addition, the feeling that things could be (all) right guides anticipation and action and determines how possibility and potentiality function (Adams et al., 2009). Positive anticipation is fundamental to action; it gives people a sense of what needs to be done. When possibility and potentiality are anticipated as negative, people are extremely cautious of others and think of possibilities with reservations (Vigh, 2011), as the study suggests. Consequently, reactions through anticipation are not easily mobilised at the level of the individual or group (Bryant & Knight, 2019a). The fear that the future will not bring (good) encounters restricts the ability to show trust in the present, where people reflect thoughtfully on what one is doing and reject or endorse one's motives and actions (Liisberg et al., 2015), which some interlocutors have experienced.

Joint practices represent a power when people do what they are supposed to do or what is expected and agreed upon (Schatzki, 2010). According to the interlocutors and literature (Klemenčič cited in Rac et al., 2020), hidden and borderline disobedience to rules was a practice with a long tradition in the region. Looking at previous experiences with

cooperatives, this practice was also common. Interlocutors who were members of a cooperative often reported the dilemma of what personal, common, and collective goals should be pursued in the event of a sale or payment—to adhere to organisational rules or bypass them and act “like others” in order to achieve the best profit at the moment. According to the respondents, some of them chose the second option, which slowly undermined the organisation and weakened trust.

Some interviewees are convinced—one of them recently experienced this in his private company—that the farmers would always sell on the black market and bypass the cooperative or any other business organisation. Because of the expectation that everyone, others, or even they personally, will stay or behave according to the rules of disobedience as in the past, and also because of the interlocutors’ conviction that their transcendent projection (Lisberg, 2015) will not change the future meaning, people are not willing to act, be, or become different. As a result, no one is willing to take the initiative or participate in similar future stories because they believe they will be tricked in the long run, according to the experiences, expectations, and perceptions of themselves and others. Strategies among the interlocutors for coping with this kind of ambiguity, which mainly maintain the status quo, are passivity and the idea of a different future due to external changes.

For the time being, the only way to start a new collaboration in relation to a farmers’ organisation was, in the interlocutors’ imagination, the what-if clause—if someone comes and sets everything in motion, or if the political measures require it, we will be ready or forced to rethink the old and familiar in the light of new experiences (Lisberg et al., 2015). This dynamic implies that the purpose of the external initiator and the subsequent establishment of rules is to remove burdensome uncertainties in the cooperation, which makes the cooperation appear insecure in the present and future (Schatzki, 2010).

External intervention can be seen as the only way to restore formal market cooperation on a large scale, as this has proved to be the case from time to time. Politically cooperative practices were: a) imposed after World War II, b) transformed into a profitable economic unit in a market environment after 1991, and c) promoted through producer organisations a decade after Slovenia joined the EU European Union in 2004 (Avsec & Štromajer, 2015). When the initiation for a market cooperative in the region came directly from the farmers, as in the case of the specialised fruit cooperative, the activity ended badly for all farmers involved. The stories and emotions of the interlocutors show that unsuccessful joint actions, in which they take responsibility individually and as a community, have the greatest influence on their relations with each other and their precau-

tions toward the future. They are not willing to revive such a thing, so they wait for something new to be forced upon them by others.

Bad experiences in the past have changed farmers' future orientation towards their willingness to cooperate, their idea of successful and meaningful cooperation, and their actions as a whole. In most interlocutors' narrations, the present imaginary of cooperation does not bring the possibility of novelty, meaning that it is not experienced as a possible enrichment of life and is not shaped according to any individual or collective needs or wishes (Liisberg et al., 2015).

Cooperation as a potentiality

Optimistic approaches to cooperation as a possibility are rare among interlocutors, although, in some rarer cases, individuals decide to mobilise to push possibilities into the potentialities and ultimately further into future actual. For the activation of potentiality in the case of cooperation, people need to find partners and rely on them. For the beginning of joint construction and actualisation of certain future, people need to evaluate whether they can trust someone to meet future expectations and overcome unpredictable negative events and conduct. If potential partners decide to trust each other, based on past reliance, successful social interaction, display of "good farmer's" symbols (see Riley et al., 2018; Sutherland & Burton, 2011) and so on, they believe their relationship has a future (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Liisberg et al., 2015). In the case of the interlocutors, this decision often does not even occur. The reasons for this are listed down below.

By investing in possible shared virtual futures with certain expectations and trust, people take many risks, including risks of rejection and disappointment and the immediate suffering afterwards, which were often identified in the interviews. Thus, a step towards potentiality is often accompanied by disappointment and frustration because potential partners do not make the expected contribution or are not interested in the same topic. This type of experience is widespread among both the middle and younger generations of farmers in the region. This may be because the activation of potentiality stimulates a form of movement towards a change, towards an (un)desirable future. The movement can be associated with hope and possibility, as well as speculation and fear (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Liisberg et al., 2015).

Speculative practices of risk-taking and risk-bearing are inherent in agriculture, both at the global level and the farm level (Appadurai, 2013; Ploeg et al., 2009). According to the

results of the study, the ethics of probability resulting from a regime of quantification, systematised rationalities, risk management and cost-benefit calculations (Appadurai, 2013; Fisher, 2013; Salazar, 2017) are also embedded in the practice of agricultural cooperation and its future orientation. Benefit-sharing was the main argument of the interlocutors against activating the potentiality of cooperation activities. People have a problem accepting the plurality of visions of a good life, as they are confronted with uncertainty about the actualisation of their desired future, which can be shaken and endangered by the (unexpected) behaviour of others. To alleviate the fear of uncertainty, people take speculative imagination of the future (Bryant & Knight, 2019a). They manage the future or visions by manipulating the obligatory passage point of possibility and potentiality before turning it into actuality (Adams et al., 2009) through individualism, maintaining the status quo and placing cooperation on the level of impossibility. The display of efforts and expectations of cooperation towards potentiality and actuality can be understood not only as a willingness to do or change something but also as an ability and capacity for a change and conduct the conduct of others (Liisberg et al., 2015).

The findings imply that people believe that the initiator is better able to enforce her/his vision of the good life and manipulate the visions of others. Since people in the region are usually not proactive in initiating, establishing, or negotiating a collaboration, they protect their visions through ignorance and unwillingness to do anything. This managerial effect of vigilance and passivity in the “danger zones” not only eliminates the initiator (and her/his hope), but also prevents the emergence of any potential for cooperation or, in the best case, means the diversion of forces to realise another potential. Human decisions and interventions that impede cooperation activities are aimed at the maintenance of conditions and the interchangeability of status and roles (Adams et al., 2009; Bryant & Knight, 2019a).

Furthermore, if the potential does not materialise as desirable or expected, the future can take the form of emptiness and exhaustion (Bryant & Knight, 2019a). This was reflected in the study in two ways. Firstly, the majority of the interlocutors assumed that cooperation was impossible or unnecessary. Second, farmers who tried unsuccessfully to push the potential for market cooperation gave up cooperation quite easily and later succeeded in establishing or strengthening independent distribution channels. The individualistic path is also a generally shared view on what is appropriate and expected of farmers' behaviour, although this kind of belief and negative experiences with cooperation practices primarily point to long-standing producers. (Relatively) new farmers plan to net-

work within many activities. They operate from different normative viewpoints and time-value systems (Persoon & Est, 2000) than the majority of farmers in the region.

Cooperation as a disposition

Given that farmers rarely see cooperation as a possibility, a potentiality, or a desirable future, it is not surprising that dispositions regarding their cooperation are beyond their imagination. They only pointed to what specific agricultural policy support could bring them and what other farmers should do to survive.

The results show that although the creation of a producer organisation as a form of cooperation is supported with funds and will become more important in the coming years, farmers believe that such an organisation will be difficult to achieve. The interviewees were aware of organisational shortcomings and lack of common interests, although the power of the large agricultural enterprises was identified as the biggest obstacle to joint market entry. In this case, the power of the agricultural business enterprises could be understood as a capacity. Agricultural business enterprises exercise power to the extent that they have the competence and ability to affect others by influencing their dispositions (Liisberg et al., 2015). Although there was no preliminary and concrete experience with producer organisations in the region, the market and decision-making power of agricultural business enterprises structures the possible fields of action of producers in such a way that the latter are convinced that they will gain nothing and change nothing if they set up an organisation.

Furthermore, power is also a capability to direct the way people relate to themselves and behave towards themselves, and it is a capacity to do this in and through the way people relate to and direct themselves (Liisberg et al., 2015). When some interviewees noted that other small farmers should join forces to survive in the long term, they simultaneously projected their future in the opposite direction than they were told—they are big enough to hold out and not to cooperate with others. In this way, they not only displayed their superiority and confidence but also exercised the freedom in terms of possibility and ability to make decisions according to their own (inner) will (Bryant & Knight, 2019a; Liisberg et al., 2015).

Although there is no personal disposition for market cooperation between farmers in the region, there are stories of successful and new cooperation in Pomurje and outside the region (in Slovenia and neighbouring countries) that could change this. Existing cooperation practices and possibilities for cooperation can be limited and fragile according to

experience, the current thinking of the (interviewed) farmers, and their future orientation, which usually does not foresee any change. It is unlikely that the change in thinking and acting will manifest itself if people do not see themselves as agents, are not recognised as experiencing subjects or do not see cooperation as opening up an opportunity for them. People need to see the change and its results as their own, as being at their disposal, or in the words of the interlocutor, everyone needs to see the benefit in working together. In addition, people should not feel subservient; they need to have a sense of control over what happens in order to agree to or engage with the change (Liisberg et al., 2015).

Conclusions

The aim of the present research was to discuss the possibilities, potentials, and dispositions of the formal cooperation of the farmers in Pomurje. This study has shown that in the (short) future there will hardly be any joint action by the farmers because, after the bad experiences and negative expectations with cooperatives, they are convinced that this kind of cooperation cannot bring anything new or good. The results on the potentiality of cooperation have highlighted the problem of assessing a critical mass of people who want to push forward and implement change. Farmers manipulate the obligatory passage of potentiality before actuality by passivity in order to maintain the balance of power among them. As far as dispositions are concerned, farmers (rightly) expect to be forced to cooperate in the form of a producer organisation. They believe that this option can be neither fruitful nor significant given the market power of the large Slovenian agricultural business enterprises in the region and beyond. In contrast, interlocutors expect small farmers to cooperate in order to survive, but by excluding themselves from this intention, they exercise their independence from others, which is the norm.

Renouncing this negative anticipation and expectation toward joint market activities has led farmers to practices of autonomy and self-control, including private stores and brands. However, the predominant form of cooperation between producers in the private sphere, which also increasingly represents a desirable future, can be empowering for a very small group of farmers who are likely to be better off economically and socially than others who are more passive. Furthermore, as long as farmers individually occupy the same market niches as agricultural business enterprises, the latter can retain control over the market situation. These circumstances, which are disempowering for farmers, can provide a huge reservoir of opportunities to address farmers' future orientations, such as hope, possibility, anticipation and potentiality to gradually reverse their

visions of the desirable future and provide an impetus for a better future and joint participation.

The study was not designed to deal exclusively and in depth with farmers' perceptions of the future. A recommendation for further studies would be to incorporate the theoretical background on future orientations throughout the research process. The approach has been shown to be able to identify and describe actual processes in rural areas, understand the reasons for change and stagnation, and propose or provide measures to reduce or eliminate ambiguities in order to address the desirable future of rural people and push selected and desirable possibility towards potentiality and actuality. From this perspective, future research could also focus on a narrower research topic, namely the role of leadership presence, agricultural policies, their design and success, or farmers' informal networks on farmers' cooperation and their future orientations. Moreover, future research should (cross-)examine (in)successful, initial or long-standing practices of cooperation in farming communities not only in Slovenia, but also in other (former communist) countries, as the selected rural area is characterised by a number of failed histories of cooperation and negative emotions towards cooperation.

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Povzetek

Načini kmetovanja, sistemi vrednot in prihodnje vizije ljudi na evropskem podeželju so vse bolj raznolike. Kljub temu bodo morali prebivalci ruralnih okolij najti skupni jezik in sodelovati, saj tovrstne prakse na podlagi raziskav spodbujajo kmetijska politika z različnimi ukrepi in pobudami. Prispevek obravnava tržno sodelovanje med kmeti kot možnost, potencialnost in dispozicijo, da bi se boljše razumelo pretekle in sedanje odnose, trenutne omejitve sodelovanja in predvidelo spremembe na tem področju. Raziskava je bila opravljena v pomurski regiji v Sloveniji. Terensko delo je v obliki kratkotrajnih obiskov in vmesnega šestmesečnega opazovanja z udeležbo potekalo med marcem 2018 in 2020. Opravljenih je bilo več kot 50 polstrukturiranih pogovorov. Rezultati kažejo na prepletenost slabih preteklih izkušenj, pasivnost kmetov in ohranjanje odnosov moči, kar se odraža v redkih in krhkih vizijah možnega sodelovanja. Do potenciala za sodelovanje običajno niti ne pride, saj je predhodno blokiran ali zapade. Kljub temu so nekatere prakse sodelovanja, še posebej med mladimi in novimi kmeti, zaželene. Študija primera je razkrila številne razloge, zakaj so nekatere oblike sodelovanja med sogovorniki dojete kot nemogoče. V članku je predstavljen nov pogled na raziskovanje sodelovanja kmetov s proučevanjem njihovih usmeritev v prihodnost z namenom ovrednotenja njihovih prepričanj v kolektivno prihodnost in (z)možnosti za spremembe.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: sodelovanje kmetov, usmeritev v prihodnost, možnost, potencialnost, dispozicija

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