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# Developing farmers' autonomy to move towards more sustainable systems

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## **Abstract:**

Farmer autonomy has become a research issue and a key factor for the farming systems transition. However, there is no consensual definition of what farmer autonomy at work is, nor any way of describing it to promote it. To contribute to this challenge, the aim of this paper is to identify the underlying dimensions of farmers' work autonomy processes, as well as the conditions that have favored or prevented it. We approach it as a process of renormalization and learning at work. To this end, we have combined two methods of data collection: individual interviews of farmers and the confrontation of an individual trajectory with the collective. In this way, we identified how important it is for these farmers to choose their own system and finding meaning, in spite of being confronted with the norms of the local environment. Participating in collectives that set new professional norms is a way of promoting transition. We have shown that their posture is a condition conducive to experimentation and renormalization. Finally, articulating renormalization theories and valuation is essential to understanding autonomy at work. These results open up avenues for reflection on designing collective training settings that mobilize individual trajectories to achieve collective and individual learning.

**Keywords:** farmers' work autonomy, renormalization, learning conditions, training systems.

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## **Purpose**

Farmer autonomy has become a central research object for understanding farming systems transition (FST) (Milestad et al., 2012). This actor autonomy is an intrinsic property of the resilience of organic farmers (Perrin, 2021) and a means of achieving a sustainable professional transition (Coquil, 2023). Although the aforementioned work shows that farmer's autonomy is an issue for research and a key factor for FST. Exploring the diversity of learning configurations, including the forms of temporary dependence on which they are based, that enable people to take the path towards empowerment (Dewey, 2011), is a challenge for education and training research (Mayen, 2017). Within this context, this research aims to understand farmers' work autonomy and identify the learning conditions that foster it.

To do this, from a developmental approach rooted in the spirit of activity theories, we approach the autonomy at work of livestock farmers as a process of reconception and

debate of norms (called "renormalization" by Schwartz and Durrive, 2003)<sup>18</sup> emerging in confrontation with work situations and in interaction with their work environments. On the other hand, by acknowledging the close links between competence and autonomy, defined by (Zarifian, 2002), for whom autonomy is an essential condition for the deployment of competence, we have also chosen to study autonomy as a learning process at work, at the crossroads between collective and individual dynamics. It is thus a dual experiential process: the conception of norms 1) through farmers' singular confrontation with work, on the one hand, and 2) through their participation in collectives in which these norms and individual experiences are exchanged and discussed, on the other. Our theoretical perspective sees these interdependent processes as potential factors in the development of skills and the empowerment of farmers in the exercise of their profession.

To date, there is no consensual definition in the literature regarding farmer's autonomy at work and its specific role in the FST. Furthermore, there is no stable method to understand and foster it through training systems. To contribute to these issues, the aim of the paper is to identify the dimensions underlying farmers' work autonomy processes, as well as the conditions that fostered or hindered them, with two perspectives: 1) to contribute to the theorization of autonomy at work 2) to translate our findings in terms of learning and coaching issues for farmers to promote it.

## Methodology

We collected data in two stages. In the first stage, we carried out eight individual semi-directive interviews with farmers, involving the feeding of their herds from semi wild vegetation, to increase the forage autonomy of livestock farms. These practices guide farmers to adopt a dynamic and adaptive management philosophy between the processes of animal feeding, the dynamics of plants and the farmer's management practices. Farmers are located in different mid-mountain regions in France and selected based on two criteria, the implementation of agroecological practices and their participation in collectives that share these "non-standard" practices, which allows us to examine the dynamics between farmers' groups and individuals. To conduct these in-depth surveys, between March and December 2023, we drew on the "chronicle of change" (Chizallet et al., 2019), a tool based on a chronological timeline that helps understand the transformations of work on the farm by examining the difficulties, objectives and resources involved in these changes. Our aim in using this tool was to understand the process of autonomy at work and then to reconstruct it through narrative activity (Bruner, 2002), based on the premise that renormalization takes place over time. The narrative approach enables us to integrate this diachronic perspective.

Secondly, we led a workshop divided into two parts: in the first, a farmer - in interview - recounted to fifty farmers of the network "Pâtur'Ajuste"<sup>19</sup>, his path to autonomy at work. In the second part, we split into two groups and led discussions on how this storytelling

<sup>18</sup> Drawing on Canguilhem's theory of "normativity", which affirms, "the effort by which the individual attempts to anticipate subjection to the norm", Schwartz and Durrive (2003) propose renormalization as a means of enabling individuals to become "subjects of the norm". This process is the result of a "debate and arbitration", between "antecedent norms" and "reworked norms", which takes place in the course of activity.

<sup>19</sup> The Pâtur'Ajuste network is a group of breeders from all over France who meet twice a year to exchange experience and knowledge on how to make the most of semi-natural environments. The network is run by Scopela, a Scop for consulting and training, which promotes independent decision-making by farmers.

resonated with each farmer. The aim was to raise awareness of renormalization through language and discussion in a mediating social context (Vygotsky, 1985) and create a debate of norms. These two types of methods - individual interviews on the one hand, and the autonomy story on the other - provide complementary data for targeted study of dual experiential processes of renormalization. These two corpora were structured into a database using NVIVO software, then analyzed inductively using a "grounded theory" approach (Bryant et al., 2019), by going back and forth between data, coding (descriptive then analytical) and bibliographical readings, and then expanding and generalizing our theoretical findings on farmer's autonomy (Yin, 2018).

## Findings

### ***1.1 Choosing one's system and finding meaning despite confrontation with the norms of the local environment***

All the farmers interviewed affirm their desire to be in control of their choices and the changes they implement, as expressed by farmer E6: *"I like to change, but when it's me who decides to change"*. For breeder E2, it is also important to understand the reasons behind her choices, as this translates into a form of *"mastery"* that gives her the confidence to *"take the plunge"* and accept the consequences of her choices. All the farmers stressed the importance of making decisions that make sense to them, and that correspond to their professional and personal objectives, and to their vision of economically frugal, environmentally friendly farming. Among their motivations, the search for pleasure at work and a balance between professional and personal life emerged as elements shared by all breeders.

Most of the breeders surveyed come from a farming background. In only two cases (E1, E5) did the breeders say that their fathers had left them *"free to make their own choices"* when they took over their farms. For farmer E5, this went against the *"patriarchal system"* on farms, where the immediate family does not let the next generation make choices. For farmer E1, the choice to move towards economically frugal, ecological farming was a continuation of his father's commitment.

Their desire to choose their own system is reflected in the implementation of practices that go against what they have learned at school (E1, E4) or from their family environment (E2, E3, E6), or from an alternative view of dominant agriculture (E5). Nonetheless, at certain points in their careers, the majority of farmers have followed norms that they now see as external, for example by adopting *"system security"* practices modelled on those of their neighbors (E3), or by applying ammonium nitrate to their plots on the advice of their father-in-law (E5): *"I was led to believe that (ammonium nitrate) was a necessity. As a result, it took me 10 years of installation to say to myself, Bah no, in fact, I don't think we need it"*. In contrast, farmer E7, who set out on his own path right from the start of his installation, claims to have drawn on his past professional experience to identify the system that suited him: *"I knew that putting ewes outside all year round, for me, in my head, was sure to work"*.

The farmers who took part in the "autonomy story" workshop testified to the weight of the *"gaze of others"*, mainly their close circle of family, neighbors and/or the owners of the land they rent. In some cases, breeders follow the norms of these social circles, which are *"generally accepted"*, in a logic of compromise and social cohesion. Other breeders,

who do not come from farming backgrounds, said they were also subject to this pressure, and felt the constant need to prove their skills to their neighbors. One breeder said she suffered from *"impostor syndrome"* due to a *"lack of confidence"* in herself. These results suggest that breeders work under the gaze and influence of others' norms, which they may see as a brake on change and experimentation.

### **1.2 Participating in informal groups or networks that promote new professional standards**

The adoption of "non-standard" practices can dissuade breeders from talking about their technical choices, because of their presumed distance, or even their presumed incompatibility with conventional practices. However, breeders E5 and E3 do express a need to break out of their isolation and, to do so, to establish links with other types of social circles that are similar to their own: *"I was trying to break out of my isolation, and I was trying to tell myself that maybe I'm not alone, that I need to find people who think like me and try to do what I do"* (E5). However, each breeder has his or her own way of creating their milieu, either through a formal collective, or by creating their own more informal networks.

Breeders E1, E2, E3 and E5, who belong to existing breeder collectives in their territories<sup>20</sup>, emphasize the positive effects of belonging to these collectives:

- Taking a step back to *"get your head out of the game"* (E3) and get a constructive, non-judgmental outside view, which encourages breeders to ask questions.
- Exchange of experiences with other breeders: *"It's the exchange of practices, experiences and feedback from others that reinforces our decisions. Yes, it worked for him, why wouldn't it work for me?"* (E1).
- Feeling legitimate about what they do, in order to communicate with those around them *"and that allows me to put into words, to theorize these practices too, to put words to them and be able to explain them, and not feel all alone"* (E3).
- Collectively, through exchanges between peers, they build new points of references on the effects of their actions and thus find a guiding thread, which helps them overcome the discomfort caused by a lack of vision on their actions: *"You have no hindsight, you don't know where you're going. Somewhere you're going down a tunnel, but you don't know where the exit is. You don't know if there is one, and you don't know if you're going to come out on the right side or the wrong side. You have no reference, you have no one who can help you"* (E6).

In addition, three farmers (E5, E6, E7) have built up their own informal support network, with neighbors or farmer friends, i.e. by *"selecting the people we want to talk to"* (E6). The help they received from this *"network of trust"* enabled them to make progress in solving technical problems by drawing on the experience of other farmers, such as ewe's foot rot incidents in the case of farmer E6, or the identification of a toxic plant that was causing the loss of lambs in the case of farmer E7.

<sup>20</sup> Collectives organized and run by leaders of ecological agriculture development structures (Patur'en Pilat, Cant'ADEAR, ADDEAR 48). The main aim of these groups is to organize training courses and peer-to-peer exchanges of experience.

### **1.3 Develop a posture that encourages experimentation and the construction of one's own thought process**

According to the farmers interviewed, the agro-ecological transition is accompanied by many doubts, uncertainties and a lack of references. Experimenting, observing and evaluating the results of their actions is a way for them to build references and redesign new standards. For farmer E1, testing the cessation of shredding enabled him to redefine indicators of success (*"It saved me time, diesel and danger"*). When they consider the results of their experiments to be positive in technical or work terms, these farmers express satisfaction at being able to challenge the external norms by those around them: *"People used to say 'he starves his animals to death' or that sort of thing. And now, it's quite the opposite when I see old farmers walking among my cows, saying that your heifers are in good condition, even though they're still grazing in winter"* (E1). However, it is not just a matter of experimenting on a one-off, isolated basis, but also of prioritizing experiments to maintain continuity in the work: *"We're in a work with so many cursors that you have to master some of them before agreeing to move others"* (E3).

For farmers, undertaking trials also means overcoming certain apprehensions, whether they relate to objective conditions (e.g. for E1, the availability and quality of the resource for winter grazing), or subjective ones (e.g. for E2, who expresses the fear of facing *"uncertainty"* and the feeling of not being ready to do so). In all cases, we have identified that their posture to cope with a transition to the unknown is a condition conducive to renormalization. For example, E1, E3, E5, E6 and E7 emphasize their ability to question their practices (*"get out of the rut"*). Indeed, they affirm their appetite for reflection, questioning and ongoing experimentation, which enable them to learn for themselves, to feed off their successes and mistakes: *"Yeah, I need that, I need to think, I need to ask myself questions and . ... and you see, I'm telling you that I've got a system that's been in place for a few years now, but in fact, it's true without being true, because... the day I stop questioning myself, I'll stop"* (E5). Finally, they tend to approach problems from a different angle, putting the risks into perspective: *"There wasn't a risk ... it's not like when you make an investment and say 'I'm going to build a building, there's a risk. So to say 'I'm going to make them eat bramble, ..., but if they don't eat it, it doesn't really matter'"* (E1). These postures foster the reassurance that was recognized during the workshop as a lever for *"mapping out one's own path"* and daring to experiment by going beyond external views and standards.

The construction of their own scheme of thought led the majority of the breeders surveyed, on the one hand, to deconstruct their own habits and those of their animals, and on the other, to redesign their system while dealing with their parcels of land, their animals and the farm's soil and climate conditions: *"From 2008, my reasoning was a little different, ... There are big disadvantages because it's fragmented, because it's very difficult to mechanize, because it's very constrained. And that's when I said to myself, it's like that anyway, so I might as well try to turn these constraints into assets"* (E5). Breeders constantly adjust and rebuild their ideas according to the singularities of the work situations they encounter, which can be particularly demanding: *"So, I don't have any major ideas to deconstruct, but on the other hand, I have everything to build. That's more like it. And that's very, very energy-consuming"* (E8).

## Practical Implications

Our results show that farmers' decisions are part of a chronology integrating both professional and personal events, which we have identified using our methodology inspired by the chronicle of change (Chizallet et al., 2019). As research continues to evolve in its understanding of agricultural systems (Milestad et al., 2012), it seems important to us to extend this understanding with regard to their personal and professional experiences, as articulated by the individual and the collective. To this end, we find it is promising to be able to design collective training programs that mobilize individual trajectories to achieve collective and individual learning. This is one of the perspectives of this project, to co-design and experiment with individual coaching systems mediated by peer's collective.

Our results suggest that moving towards a FST requires a particular posture enabling action in the face of uncertainty (Dedieu et al., 2013), a posture that is constructed and could become an object of learning. Moreover, they allow us to assert that it is not just a question of redesigning individual norms, but also the professional norms of the farming profession. Creating spaces for farmers to debate professional norms, such as professional practice analysis workshops (Fablet, 2004) or "valuation communities" (Slimi, 2021), seems to us to be an appropriate way for them to redefine them collectively, to appropriate them and to engage in critical reflection on their profession, in order to keep it alive (Clot, 2008).

## Theoretical Implications

On a more theoretical level, our work also contributes to a definition of farmers' work autonomy and how to understand and foster it through training. Our results allow us to assert that farmers' autonomy at work is not just a matter of decision-making autonomy, but of understanding the reasons for their choices and the norms to which these decisions refer, as well as the origin of the norms that guide these decisions, as the theory of renormalization invites us to do. As (Prairat, 2014) points out, the norm "*sorts, makes choices, affirms behaviors to be followed or recommends practices to be implemented; conversely, it can banish attitudes or ways of doing things*".

We have shown that farmers' professional reassurance comes from being surrounded by the collectives to which they belong, in line with various studies on the subject. However, the developmental dimension of such professional reassurance supported by informal networks remains to be studied: under what conditions and through what processes does it support or hinder the autonomy of farmers?

Beyond the operational avenues we have outlined, the question arises of defining what autonomy at work is, in light of the various works already published on the subject. For example, Stock et al (2014) highlight the way in which farmers themselves grasp the notion of autonomy, primarily to claim freedom in the exercise of their profession and in their choice of lifestyle. Coquil (2023) sees this concept as a means of emancipating oneself from normative socio-professional and socio-technical systems. However, we do not subscribe to a normative approach to autonomy at work, which aims to define externally the bonds of dependence and independence in which individuals would be caught. Instead, we have chosen to focus on autonomy at work as a process of development in and through farmers' activity. This point of view leads us, consequently,



to propose an acceptation of the concept as follows in order to contribute to the theorization of autonomy at work:

- (1) *Awareness of the origin of the standards that determine choices*
- (2) *The ability to reconceive one's own standards, based on the development of know-how and the evolution of one's attitude to one's own activity.*
- (3) *Bringing activity into line with the new meaning given to work as a result of the renormalization process.*

In addition, we propose that the processes by which farmers renormalize refer to what (Dewey, 1938) calls *valuation*, in his theory of inquiry, where the reconfiguration of norms and values is triggered when "something is asked/questioned" (Dewey, 2011). In order to enrich our analysis and understanding of the farmer autonomy process, we therefore plan to articulate these two theories in the remainder of this work.

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