Social Farming: An Overview of Current Knowledge

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Introduction

• Social farming as social care practice

• This presentation will:
• Introduce the context of social care in Ireland
• Define Social Farming
• Explore research on SF outcomes
• Suggest a sociological framework
What is Social Care?

• It is a profession, requiring a professional qualification
• In Ireland, Care Workers traditionally worked in residential children’s homes
• Today, the scope is far broader
• It encompasses supporting any groups or individual identified as disadvantaged or vulnerable
Social Care Keywords (Lalor & Share):

• **Partnership**: Social care aims to not be a ‘top-down’ practice. Respect for service user. All equal, working together to find solutions. (in practice, this aim is difficult)

• **Marginalisation / disadvantage**: A ‘blame the victim’ approach is rejected – problems seen as stemming from structures in society (poverty, racism, sexism, violence etc)

• Social care workers tend to work with the *less powerful* in society. Those who experience *disadvantage* or discrimination.
Learning in Social Care

• Social care involves the **sharing of life-space**; management, therapeutic and personal care tasks

• Service users learn informally through **interaction** and **real life** experience of different social contexts and settings

• The focus has shifted from institutions to **person-centered**, **community-based** care
Social (or Care) Farming

• One way in which service users can partake in the ‘real world’ and benefit from it in many different ways.
• Part of a wider recognition of the benefits of hands-on experiences of nature.
• **Green Care:** Using ‘nearby nature’, animal therapy and horticulture to increase physical and emotional well being.
Definition (1)

- “Social farming includes all activities that use **agriculture resources**, both from plants and animals, in order to **promote** (or to generate) **therapy, rehabilitation, social inclusion, education and social services in rural areas.**
- However, it is strictly related to **farm activities** where (small) groups of people can stay and work together with family farmers and social practitioners.” (Di Lacovo & O’Connor 2009)
Definition (2)

• “An outcome based placement on family farms as a form of social service. The farm (...) remains a typical working farm where people availing of support benefit from participation in the farm’s activities in a non-clinical environment.

• It also creates the opportunity to reconnect farmers with their local communities through opening up of their farms as a community support for a range of people”. (Social Farming Ireland 2017)
History of Social Farming

• Horticulture and animal care have sometimes been used for therapeutic purposes in the past
• E.g. Camphill Communities, gardens attached to residential institutions, community centers etc

• Social Farming formalises such practices
The Netherlands

• In Holland, Social Farming started in 1990s
• Better funding from 1999 when formal connection was made at policy level between agriculture and the social care sector
• Less than a decade later, there were almost **800 Social Farms** and approx. **12,000 service users** who had benefitted from Social Farming (Hassink et al., 2007; Hine et al., 2008)
Social Farming in Ireland

• **SoFAB project:** EU sponsored cross border initiative 2011-2014

• Administered through the Special EU Programmes Body and delivered through the partnership of University College Dublin, Leitrim Development Company and Queen’s University Belfast.

• **Aims:** Increase public awareness (short term) & establish Social Farming in the region to benefit health/wellbeing and rural development (long term)

• 66 people spent up to 30 days each on 20 farms in the project region which covered the six counties of Northern Ireland and the six border counties of the Republic of Ireland.
Social Farming Ireland (SoFI)

- The success of the SoFAB project led to the establishment of Social Farming Ireland (SoFI).
- Leitrim Dev Co with the support of the Department of Agriculture opened the national social farming support office in 2015, with two part time staff.
- They are growing a national network, with partners nationwide (Waterford Leader Partnership, West Limerick Resources and South West Mayo Development Co).
- SoFI will act as a link between care providers and farmers.
- There are currently about 40 Social Farms in the Republic (SoFI 2017).
- Paid by HSE: Placement is part of user’s service plan in line with Healthy Ireland (Peacock 2018)
Service users

• Across Europe: People with mental health difficulties, with disabilities; older people; children; people availing of drug/alcohol rehabilitation services; prisoner rehabilitation services etc (SoFAB 2014)

• Currently in Ireland (Moroney 2018):
  • Intellectual disability
  • Mental health
  • Youth
  • Long term unemployed
How does it work?

• Each service user chooses to do SF. He/she sets their own goals for the placement with their team.
• 8 – 10 week blocks. One day has to be off farm for social inclusion purposes (e.g selling vegetables at market stall, going to the mart etc.)
• Farmers are audited, trained (incl health and safety), and insured
• Confidentiality: It’s up to the service user to say who they are on the farm if others visit (e.g. a volunteer, a social farmer, etc)
• After the 8/10 weeks: Review goals and care plan. May then do another block, or move on to something else. (Peacock 2018)
Outcomes

- Research has focused on results for:
  - Service users
  - Farmers
  - Wider community

Image: Irish Times
Outcomes for service users

- **Physical benefits:**
  - Improvements in *motor skills* (walking distances on the farm, running after sheep!) (Peacock 2018)
  - Physical work can lead to *improved diet* and physical tiredness which contributes to *better sleep* (Bragg, 2013; McGloin and O’Connor, 2007)

- **Mental health benefits:**
  - Farm routine provides natural structure and clarity which serves to motivate in terms of ‘getting a job done’; farm provides a safe and peaceful environment which leads to less aggression (Elings, 2012; Leck 2013)
• **Routine/social inclusion:**
  - Benefits were identified by 81% of service users including: *interactions* with staff and farmers; meeting new people; making new friends; visiting other farms or places for supplies; and going to events such as animal sales/shows (SoFAB 2014).
  
  - Everyday **routine** (up and ready for lift or getting the bus to the farm)
  
  - **Self care** (reason to get up, get dressed etc) (Peacock 2018)

• **Knowledge/skills:**
  
  - Four out of every five service users identified the development of skills as a benefit
  
  - **Practical skills** (horticulture; animal care; construction; farm management; and woodwork).
  
  - ‘I did a lot of planting trees, flowers, cutting grass, I dug laneways, fencing. I learnt a lot’.
  
  - **Social skills** identified included: independence; communication/ interpersonal skills; coping; and listening skills; working as part of a team. (SoFAB 2014)

• **Independent living skills** (talking about moving into own place, applied for social housing, vetienary course, lawnmoving business, took up driving (Peacock 2018)
Outcomes for farmers

• **Source of income:** In the Netherlands, estimates suggest that SF can provide an annual income of €48,000 or more (Di lacovo and O’Connor, 2009; Hassink et al. 2007).

• However, this is based on 5 service users for 4 days a week

• In Belgium, most farms have an annual income of €1,000 to €10,000 from social farming (Di lacovo and O’Connor, 2009).

• **Other benefits:** sense of achievement, job satisfaction, confidence, learning new skills, meeting new people (SoFAB 2014)
Outcomes for wider community

• Economic benefits to society include more efficient and cost effective services, viability of farms, rural employment, work skills and capacities in both service users and farmers (Dessein and Bock 2010)
• Reduction in stigma
• Mental health awareness
• Social integration, neighbours get involved (Moroney 2018)
Example 1: Patrick

- Garda Youth Diversion programme / SF organized by Foroige
- At age 17, chose social farming with 3 friends
- Had never been on a farm before, was attracted to working with animals
- Was up an ready at 7.30 on SF days
- Hopes to go to agricultural college and become a farmer
Example 2: Robbie

- Resident at SVP men’s hostel
- Felt SF helped him deal with stress and challenges in life
- Said it should be alternative to formal education for those who cannot cope
- Rated it ‘1000 out of 10’!
Challenges

• Funding!

• For the farmers:
  • Cost (equipment, lunch)
  • Time (set day aside)
  • Indoor space needed

• Responsibility?
Sociology of Social Farming?

• How can we theorise the ways in which the SF experience impact both service users and farmers from a sociological perspective?

• A natural style of learning – outside classroom (Moloney 2018)

• Formal learning: Usually seen as reproducing existing structural inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron etc).

• Key to this is habitus.

• However, others argue that immersion in new settings can cause change in habitus

• E.g. Crossley’s research on the mental health service users movement.

• Working utopias.

• Can social farms act as WUs – experiments in living, which can impact a persons way of being in the world?

• The identity and habitual ways of interacting with others and the world are changed – for both farmers and service users alike.
References


- Moroney, A. (2018) Results from research on Social Farming in Ireland: Key findings from three perspectives. *Presentation given to the SFI Growing Connections, Changing Lives Conference*, Emmaus Centre, Swords, March 2018


