

## The Role of Intuition in Managing Organic Farm System Health

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### Abstract

*This article concerns the organic movement’s aim to promote health across the entire farm system as outlined by the IFOAM Principle of Health (IFOAM 2005). It discusses the implementation of Health by organic farmers in Austria, Germany and the UK. Results from an international survey and a series of workshops on health promoting strategies and principles suggest that intuition is a key feature of organic farmers’ management of farm health when the farm is understood as a system consisting of interdependent domains of soil, plants, animals, humans and ecosystems. Intuition is discussed with regard to the challenges of knowledge sharing and producing shared strategies for organic health promotion. It raises questions about how farmers can better reflect upon, learn from, and articulate seemingly intuitive decisions. The empirical results demonstrate the challenge and the possibilities of developing shared frameworks that support organic farmers in making decisions to promote farm health.*

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### Introduction

The project ‘Developing best practice networks of health in organic agricultural systems’ ran a survey and a series of workshops with organic farmers from Austria, Germany and the United Kingdom (Vieweger *et al.* 2016). The aim of the project was to better understand how organic farmers manage the health of their farms as interconnected systems and how they learn to observe and make decisions that promote farm health. The farmers represented a range of farm types and ages, and included both male and female farmers, as well as regional differences. Despite such differences the survey and workshop discussions indicated that there were several similarities in their approaches to managing farm system health.

Chief among them was a way of observing and responding to changes on their farms that the participating farmers described as “intuition”. This paper discusses how intuition plays a role in the farmers’ management of farm system health and how this finding affects how farmers can share and learn health management strategies.

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## Material and methods

Responses to online surveys were collected from 79 organic farmers in Austria, Germany and the UK. The survey collected farm type and demographic data about the farmers and asked why they had converted to organic, what changes in farm health they had witnessed since converting to organic, what practices were used to improve the health of their farms, and what the healthy outputs of their farms were. The surveys were analysed qualitatively, using descriptive and pattern coding techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2013), to identify ten key statements about promoting the health of the farm. The farm was understood as a complete system made up of several interdependent domains.

These key statements were discussed in three national workshops with five invited organic farmers from each country, one international workshop with the same farmers, and one workshop with farmer and non-farmer stakeholders. The farmers were invited based on recommendations by local experts from organic associations, other farmers, and researchers. The aim of the workshops was to identify areas of agreement and disagreement about the management of farm system health, locate issues of particular importance or concern, and develop key strategies that reflect these discussions. The final workshop helped refine the strategies, but ultimately aimed to raise questions and discussion points for future research.

Intuition emerged as an important shared concept during the first international farmer workshop. Key descriptions and associated ideas were drawn from the discussions that took place at the workshop, and were retroactively used to analyse the national workshops. These ideas included: being fully emotional; being spiritually engaged; following your gut feeling; self-reflection and intuition. Additional associations were drawn from the national workshops. The analysis of intuition as a key concept for organic farmers’ management of farm health has, therefore, been an iterative process.

Intuition was raised independently in the German and Austrian national workshops, and both groups decided to create a new statement encompassing these concepts. The UK farmers did not explicitly mention intuition during their national workshop. However, during the international workshop they agreed with and helped to refine the statement added by the Austrians and Germans.

All workshop discussions were recorded. The recordings as well as additional materials such as field notes, photographs, and exercise materials were analysed using qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti.

## Results

The theme of intuition was not noticeable in the survey data. However, it was particularly present in the discussions at the German national workshop, exemplified by the following quote:

“We’re always talking about things that are not actually tangible in almost every point [statement]. Today we have so many people looking for numbers and measurements, but this is something older, something that we have lost, like intuition. It is clear that this plays a role. This inner voice, intuition, awareness, a feeling. And it happens at every point [...]. In my mind it should be the first point concerning the importance for health” (Farmer3\_DEU, translated).

In a similar discussion at the Austrian national workshop, farmers expressed that: “It is so important to be able to observe and learn to observe the strengths and weaknesses of your farm [...]” (Farmer1\_AT, translated).

As a result of the Austrian and German farmers’ discussions, a strategy about intuition was added to the list of key strategies to be discussed at the international organic farmers’ workshop. The final set of key strategies, as it appeared at the conclusion of the international workshop, contained ten

strategies.<sup>6</sup> Strategy no.1, specifically concerning intuition, was considered an overarching principle that is intertwined in the other strategies. It reads:

“Farmers who aim to run healthy farming systems develop the intuition and ability for self-observation as part of the observation process of the farm; and they are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and know their own resources and those of the farm.”

#### *Defining intuition*

Participants at the international farmers’ workshop described intuition as “daring to listen to your intuition/gut feeling regardless of rational explanation [...] To listen to intuition is the same, but the solutions are different for every farm” (Farmer2\_DEU, translated). Intuition was seen as stemming from being “fully emotionally and spiritually engaged with what you’re doing, committed” (Farmer2\_UK).

The workshop discussions showed that intuition is not an unproblematic concept. On the one hand intuition was seen as a deeply personal ability, such that each individual has an own intuition of how the farm should be managed. It was emphasised that organic farming means not “simply following instructions” (Farmer4\_AT, translated). Management of farm health must take into account the “individuality of the farm, not just use blueprint solutions” (Farmer1\_DEU, translated). On the other hand, intuition was also seen as a profound, more objective truth, which the farmer could become aware of through personal development and commitment to understanding the farm. It “relates to a higher level than gut feeling. Intuition is more right than gut feeling. It is part of something bigger” (Farmer1\_DEU, translated). All farmers from all three countries could agree that the content of the intuition could vary, but that all farmers were capable of learning to be intuitive.

#### *Daring to listen to intuition*

However, learning to be intuitive meant that farmers had to dare to listen to their intuition regardless of rational explanation and, occasionally, in the face of criticism. The farmers felt they improved their capacities for managing farm health through mindful self-reflection and self-observation, meaning that farm health depends heavily upon personal development. This may be seen as running counter to the dominant scientific approaches to assessing and managing farm system health. Certainly, as expressed in the German national farmer workshop, intuition is perceived as relating to something more fundamental in managing farm health. However, the farmers were also aware of, and often participated in, scientific research related to managing the health of various domains on their farm, such as soil health, plant health and animal health. It may be only when considering these domains as interdependent parts of a complete farm system that analytical thinking is given less priority than intuition. As one farmer explained:

“You can have a great plan [...], but actually events get in the way: Huge climate fluctuation, devastating floods, all kinds of things. You have to be alive all the time to this intuition thing. You can’t switch that off at any time [...] and your management has to respond. [...] Things do get more complicated, opportunities come and opportunities go” (Farmer1\_UK).

#### *Intuition and learning*

This intuitive decision-making means that farmers have to know their strengths and weaknesses and match their capacities with the level of complexity of their farm (Farmer2\_DEU, translated). The more complex the farm, the greater was the perceived level of intuition required to manage it. Experiencing the fluctuations of farm management both furthered and relied upon the application and development of intuition. As a result, both intuition for and complexity of the farm system were seen as increasing over time, allowing new farmers to develop the two hand in hand. Learning to

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<sup>6</sup> Due to space restrictions only the most relevant will be included here. A description of the project can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/healthstatements> and the completed version of the strategies will be added early 2017.

listen to intuition was considered one of the key capacities new farmers could learn from those with more experience.

## **Discussion**

Current approaches to improve and develop (organic) farming systems are predominantly based on concepts of the natural sciences. There is little communication in scientific and farming communities about how farmers’ personal development can foster health on the farm. Our results indicate that intuition, self-observation and self-reflection are essential requirements for managing organic farms for improved health, and need to be understood in greater depth and discussed more openly.

Through cross-country farmer created strategies we make tentative strides to understand organic farmers’ management of health. More specifically, we found that intuition plays an important role in implementing farm health and affects information transfer between farmers. We emphasise the importance of this topic for best practices in Organic 3.0 and suggest it requires further investigation.

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