

Going against the grain: Unravelling the habitus of older farmers to help facilitate generational renewal in agriculture

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Abstract

Limited uptake of financial incentives, designed to confront global trends of an ageing farming population and low levels of land mobility, reveal resistance or at best ambivalence, amongst farmers towards altering existing farm management and ownership structures in later life. To uncover facets governing the mindset, disposition and practices of older farmers towards succession and retirement, this study draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus. A multi-method triangulation methodology is employed to obtain in-depth understandings of the senior generation's deeply embedded views, and the changes they perceive will occur upon their engagement in the process. Findings reveal that the attitudes and behaviour required to 'step aside' and retire from farming not only 'go against the grain' of the older farmers' habitus, appearing to be instinctively 'wrong', they also appear incompatible with what is necessary to earn recognition as a 'good farmer'. The article concludes by recommending that a shift in thinking towards succession and retirement must be confronted at an earlier

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life stage in order to inculcate a new farming habitus. In doing this, long-term resolutions through generating a regularised, accepted and well-regarded practice of intergenerational farm transfer within the farming community would be promoted.

KEYWORDS

family farming, generational renewal, habitus, land mobility, retirement, succession

INTRODUCTION

Global demographic trends reveal an inversion of the age pyramid with those aged 65 years and over constituting the fastest growing sector of the farming community (Leonard et al., 2017; Zagata & Sutherland, 2015). In Europe for example, almost one-third of all farmers are older than 65, while only around 10% of farms are run by farmers younger than 40 (Eurostat, 2020). This ‘greying’ of the farming workforce is a pressing issue in contemporary Europe, with the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development declaring generational renewal as one of nine key objectives upon which future Common Agricultural Policy post-2020 strategic plans and interventions will be built (Dwyer et al., 2019). Generational renewal in agriculture, by means of efficient and effective intergenerational farm transfer, is viewed as crucial to the survival, continuity and future of the agricultural industry, traditional family farm model, peasant farming systems and the broader sustainability of rural society (Conway et al., 2018; Korzenszky, 2018).

Whilst variations in the age structure and level of land mobility (i.e., transfer of land from one farmer to another or from one generation to the next) exist in some parts of Europe (Zagata & Sutherland, 2015), the limited uptake and success of previous and existing financial enticements, designed to incentivise and stimulate farm succession and retirement, reveal a reluctance amongst older farmers towards relinquishing managerial control and ownership of their farm in later life (Conway et al., 2016; Dwyer et al., 2019; Ingram & Kirwan, 2011). This widely reported phenomenon has resulted in significant socioeconomic challenges for young people wishing to establish a career in farming (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2016; Kirkpatrick, 2013), resulting in the experience for many successors in waiting being one of ‘frustration, conflict and unfulfilled dreams’ (Glover, 2011, p. 4).

The succession conundrum in farming, fraught with difficulties, misunderstandings and misgivings is by no means a recent phenomenon (Bika, 2007; Cassidy & McGrath, 2014; Chiswell, 2018; Gillmor, 1999; Lobley et al., 2010). Almost 50 years ago, for example, Commins’ (1973) preliminary investigation in the Republic of Ireland stressed that farm retirement schemes, with economic objectives, have only marginal success encouraging older farmers to retire if such measures ignore the possible ‘social consequences’ of the process and ‘wider issues of human welfare’ (p. 45). Despite this historical recognition, research dedicated towards understanding complex human dynamics affecting intergenerational farm transfer, have only come to the fore in recent years (Conway et al., 2016, 2018, 2019; Fischer & Burton, 2014). As such, further research directed specifically towards probing the mindset and mannerisms of the farming community is greatly

warranted to inform more appropriate 'farmer-sensitive' farm transfer policy directions before any new schemes aimed at facilitating this process are implemented.

This study, drawing on the Republic of Ireland experience, contributes to these needs and priorities within policy and research, by presenting a detailed insight into the emotional forces that prevent and interfere with farm succession and retirement in later life. More specifically, as the responsibility for directing and implementing the intergenerational farm transfer process lies heavily upon the support of the senior generation (Conway et al., 2017), this article draws on Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus. This situates the inherent set of dispositions or learned behaviours, which provide individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives, that is, 'modus operandi', within a certain social group, thereby enabling an in-depth investigation into the various facets governing the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour patterns of older farmers towards 'stepping aside' from farming and retiring. Previous research employing this theoretical framework from a farming perspective considered how decision-making processes underpinning the adoption of new agricultural policies, such as agri-environment schemes, for example, may be rendered 'culturally unsustainable' when in conflict with traditional farming practices (Burton et al., 2008). An exploration into the farming habitus may, therefore, allow discussions around intergenerational farm transfer to move beyond the myopic consideration of its economic aspects and help unpack the construction of the older farmer's worldviews or 'webs-of-belief' (Shucksmith & Herrmann, 2002, p. 4), which guide their behaviour, attitudes and actions towards what is the 'right thing to do' within the farming community (Hunt, 2009; Pike, 2008).

Due to the centrality and pervasive influence of the senior generation of the farming community identified by Conway et al. (2017), a deeper understanding and appreciation of the older farmer's habitus, will in turn aid in the modification of existing policies and/or the development and delivery of novel generational renewal in agriculture interventions and strategies. An ability to interpret the true 'language of farming' (Burton, 2004, p. 212) can help policymakers and extension specialists to sensitively deal with problematic issues surrounding intergenerational farm transfer, whilst also ensuring farmers' emotional wellbeing and quality of life in old age. Such an approach is required in order to give voice to the older farmer's position in the generational renewal policy narrative.

This introduction has served to provide a contextual footing and has indicated the direction and purpose of this article. The next section develops the concepts that underpin the research by reviewing pertinent family farm literature and provides a brief overview of relevant Irish farm transfer policy. The theoretical framework adopted as well as an overview of the methodological approach employed is then outlined. Research findings are then discussed followed by some recommendations and concluding comments relevant to policymakers and key stakeholders who have the means and ability to deliver future interventions and programmes for older farmers and their families.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generational renewal policy environment

There have been calls throughout Europe for structural and institutional deterrents obstructing the movement of farmland from older to younger generations to be addressed in order to help facilitate generational renewal in agriculture (Conway et al., 2020). Joint Farming Ventures

(JFVs), including arrangements such as farm partnerships, contract rearing and share farming are promoted internationally and within policy discourses as key strategies that can bring about the required infusion of ‘new blood’ into the industry (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2016; Nuthall & Old, 2017). Ingram and Kirwan (2011) argue however that JFVs may yield nothing like the required result without an in-depth understanding of the human side of such unconventional tenures. Indeed, research indicates that the older generation can experience difficulty relinquishing managerial control and ownership rights of the family farm, even to their own children (Whitehead et al., 2012). Ingram and Kirwan (2011) explain that while it appears that some older farmers are willing in principle to offer JFVs arrangements when it comes to the reality of ‘handing over control (or partial control) of a business they have been in charge of for perhaps 40 or 50 years’ (p. 294), they are often reluctant to do so.

The older generation’s reluctance ‘to release their grip on the business’ (DEFRA, 2002, p.59) is impacting the younger generation’s ability to embark on a true and meaningful career in farming and, under such conditions, it could take 20 years for them to assume management of the farm (Conway et al., 2017; Keating, 1996). Such a long period of family apprenticeship is a major concern. Research carried out in the UK by the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS, 2007) indicated that the younger generation of the farming community are becoming increasingly impatient as they seek greater financial independence, recognition and leadership opportunities on the family farm. If this sense of autonomy is not possible, the incumbent runs the risk of not having a successor at all. As the younger generation loses interest and motivation working in their elder’s shadow, they may well decide to leave the family business in pursuit of more fulfilling career opportunities elsewhere, resulting in highly competent young farmers being lost to the agricultural sector (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Nuthall & Old, 2017).

In the Republic of Ireland, entry into the agricultural industry is particularly inflexible. This is largely due to the fact that entry to the sector is predominately by inheritance or purchasing highly inflated farmland (Conway et al., 2019; Hennessy & Rehman, 2007). Furthermore, less than 1% of the total land area in Ireland is sold on the open market annually (DAFM, 2020). This cultural phenomenon has resulted in extraordinary socioeconomic challenges for young people aspiring to embark on a career in farming (Cush & Macken-Walsh, 2016). This in turn has profound implications not only on the development trajectory of individual family farms but also the production efficiency and economic growth of the agricultural industry and rural society as we know it (Conway et al., 2017).

Complexities of succession planning

Creating a succession plan seeks to manage such issues, setting up a smooth transition between the incumbent and the successor, thus helping to ensure the continuity and prosperity of the family farm business (Nuthall & Old, 2017; Whitehead et al., 2012). The difficulty and complexity of issues surrounding succession planning have traditionally, however, led to avoidance behaviour in many farm families (Conway et al., 2018; Foskey, 2005). Indeed, succession planning is considered one of the most complex management challenges a family business will ever face due to the emotional issues that arise from the process (Conway et al., 2016; Palliam et al., 2011). Barclay et al. (2007) highlight that very few farms have a succession plan in place and even for those who do, little discussion has taken place amongst the family during its development. In fact, McLeod and Dooley (2012) claim that the older generation is often already of the opinion that they understand their children’s hopes, expectations, beliefs and opinions on farm succession. Pitts et al. (2009)

highlight however that families often make decisions via ‘tacit understandings, unspoken agreements, and conversations spread over time and embedded in other activities’ (p. 60). A major issue here is that the older generation is making decisions about the future of the family farm ‘without having any idea of the desires and aspirations of their potential successors’ (Hicks et al., 2012, p. 101). Similarly, from an Irish perspective, Hennessy and Rehman (2007) highlight that given the ‘close-knit’ nature of Irish farming households, it is assumed that the senior generation of farmers is likely to have a good idea of the future intentions of the potential successor.

At a cognitive-emotional level, Conway et al. (2016) point out that while the older generation is often aware of the good reasons and need for devising a succession plan, they can also experience overwhelming personal psychodynamic and sociodynamic deterrents against managing their exodus from the family business. As such, older farmers often fail to act expeditiously and alter the existing management and ownership hierarchy of the family farm business. Vanclay (2004) frames this in the way that farmers experience ‘a way of life, a way of making a living that acquires a meaning far deeper than almost any other occupational identity’ (p. 213). Price and Evans (2009) in the same vein, describe how farmers are so ‘deeply rooted in the cultural and physical spaces of farming’, they ‘cannot imagine a different way of life’ (p. 6). Conway et al. (2018), however, stress that these so-called ‘soft issues’, that is, the emotional and social issues involved, are those that distort and dominate the older generation’s decisions on the future trajectory of the farm. Intergenerational farm transfer, therefore, extends the already complicated economic business dimension with an often much more complex emotional dimension.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In addition to the policy-related contribution, this study draws on Bourdieu’s notion of habitus to help uncover the various facets governing the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour patterns of the senior generation of the farming community towards farm succession and retirement in later life. Whilst Bourdieu’s work, essentially concerned with what people do in their day-to-day lives (Jenkins, 1992), has permeated agricultural geography and rural sociology because it has the potential to provide a ‘holistic explanation of farmers’ actions within changing economic circumstances’ (Yarwood & Evans, 2006, p.1309), it has been underutilised in intergenerational farm transfer research (Conway et al., 2016). Indeed, Shucksmith (1993) previously argued that farmers’ decision-making cannot be understood without reference to the concept of habitus.

Over four decades ago, Bourdieu (1977) originally explained that habitus is a system of ‘lasting and transposable dispositions’ shaped by one’s experiences and interaction with past events, as well as current practices and structures, within a ‘particular social space’ (p. 214). Habitus thus designates a way of being that informs one’s ‘modus operandi’, that is, a distinct pattern or method of operation. Such a system of inherent dispositions subsequently manifests itself in individual or collective attitudes, which are passed on through generations within families or other social groups (Stotten, 2020). This lends the habitus a certain tendency towards inertia, that is, an inability to adapt to, and take advantage of, changing conditions in a particular social milieu (Grenfell, 2012). From a farming perspective, Shortall (2014) highlights that the farmer’s habitus derives from their ‘subconscious and the cumulative assimilation of an established ethos of being a farmer’ within the farming community (p. 71). Farmers thus know instinctively the ‘right thing to do’ in a given farming situation without being fully aware of the reasons they do it (Pike, 2008). However, while habitus provides an ‘internal compass’, to orientate and guide social behaviour and practices of everyday life (Panagiotopoulos, 1990), the farmer’s trajectory can also be constrained by

it, and as a result, some actions are unthinkable (Shortall, 2014; Shucksmith, 1993; Shucksmith & Herrmann, 2002). This suggests that the older generation may be inclined to be internally conditioned to reject retirement, and continue farming for as long as possible, simply because they have learned throughout their own life experiences that such actions are considered to be ‘the way of the world’ (Webb et al., 2002, p. 25) within the farming community. Indeed, Riley (2011) previously explained that ‘past practices provide a moral framework, or ‘blueprint’, for farmers’ own current activities and actions’ (p. 21).

At the heart of this concept of habitus is the extent to which it limits or steers the capacity for change within a social system (Slee et al., 2006). While Friedmann (2005) asserts that habitus can change, and indeed can do so substantially and rapidly in the case of migrants coming from developing countries to developed countries, for example, long-settled and embedded groups such as farmers are often reluctant to adjust and adapt to changing circumstances (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012). This can be explained by the cumulatively constituted nature of the farming habitus, developed over a long period of time. Change will, therefore, only happen gradually, if at all, during a farmer’s lifetime (Shucksmith, 1993).

Habitus often reduces the possibility for action through its deeply instilled ways of ‘practising’ (Hunt, 2009), particularly the socialised norms and expectations that shape a farmer’s ‘disposition to act’ towards the apparent culturally accepted standard of resisting farm succession planning. Drawing from this, our research also builds on Adams (2006) argument that ‘many possibilities remain’ (p. 515), through innovative policy design and implementation. Exploring the deeply embedded ‘matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 214) of the farming community towards the process, this research explores how the ‘rules’ of intergenerational farm transfer can be tailored and possibly reshaped, in order to generate a regularised, accepted and indeed revered practice of succession in the farming habitus.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This research employs a multi-method triangulation design to obtain in-depth, holistic understandings of the various facets governing the mindset of farmers towards change in later life. Triangulation is the collection of data from multiple sources maintaining the same foci, that each contributes uniquely to the ascertainment, description or understanding of a subject area (Burns & Grove, 2001). For the purpose of this study, triangulation was assured using a collection of both qualitative and quantitative data through the use of problem-centred interviews in conjunction with a complimentary national survey of Irish farmers. Approaching the research phenomenon from different yet co-equal and interdependent methodological vantage points counteracts the limitations and biases that stem from using a single method, thus increasing the reliability, validity and rigour of findings (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

Sample selection

The first phase of data collection involved a problem-centred interview approach (Witzel, 2000), with a 10% ($n = 19$) sample of 194 randomly selected farmers aged 55 and over in attendance at a series of ‘Transferring the Family Farm’ events hosted by Teagasc, the Agriculture and Food Development Authority in Ireland, who supplied their contact details for the interview at a later date as part of this study. Over 2,800 farmers attended these events held at 11 different locations

throughout the Republic of Ireland in September and October 2014. The reasoning for specifically focussing on farmers aged 55 and over was that one of the terms and conditions for Irish farmers intending to retire under the Early Retirement Scheme (ERS 3, June 2007), was that participants must have been 'between his/her 55th and 66th birthday' to be eligible (DAFM, 2007). As part of Teagasc's campaign to advertise and promote these 'Transferring the Family Farm' events, invitations were sent out to each of their 43,000 farming family clients to attend. This interview sample, therefore, provides a comprehensive, nationally representative sample of the Irish farming population spread evenly across a range of diverse regions, farm sizes and operations (see Table 1). It is acknowledged, however, that a degree of potential bias may exist in this sample towards those who may be considering the idea of farm transfer.

Problem-centred interview

The problem-centred interview is a methodological tool that prioritises narrative accounts, which represent the interviewees' experiences and life-worlds, in his or her own words, whilst also providing a focus on the 'problem' that the researcher aims to address (Witzel, 2000). The concept of the 'problem' in this particular piece of research refers to agricultural policy's lack of consideration, and in many cases, disregard for the human dynamics affecting the intergenerational farm transfer process in later life. Research participants, recruited at the aforementioned Teagasc events, were first contacted in April 2015 to confirm their willingness to partake further in the study and subsequently interviewed from May until August 2015. Given the personal nature of the issues under investigation, the use of individual face-to-face interviews in the homes of the respondents was deemed the most appropriate means of obtaining information from the senior generation of the farming community. The problem-centred interviews lasted up to 2.5 h and were digitally recorded. Tape recording the interviews allowed for an authentic and precise record of the communication process, which afterwards permitted complete and accurate transcriptions, transcribed verbatim, in full. Verbatim transcriptions helped capture the interviewee's true voice (Denzin, 1995) and produced a representation of each participant that was authentic, accurate and trustworthy. Anonymisation of data in this study was ensured by replacing the participants' real names with pseudonyms at the earliest possible opportunity. Mayring's (2000) two-step approach to qualitative content analysis, integrating deductive category application and inductive category development, was subsequently employed to analyse the data. Following Mayring (2000), interview transcriptions were first analysed deductively, applying previously defined, theory-based categories, in this case, based on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, to systematically code the data. Cognizant of the limitations of the use of deductive coding alone in the analysis of such data, in which it may miss text containing important ideas or perspectives that do not fall under the pre-designed set of theory-driven categories (Drisko & Maschi, 2015), inductive category development was also employed to interpret the underlying, implied meaning within the text (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2000). The combination of deductive and inductive content analysis resulted in a thorough, coherent and comprehensive final coding agenda that incorporated theory and material.

Teagasc National Land Use Farm Survey

In order to validate, strengthen reliability and build on the qualitative data gathered from the problem-centred interviews, the second phase of data collection involved a list of questions on

TABLE 1 Problem-centred interview participant details

Pseudo name	Gender	Age	Farming enterprise	Regional location	Considered retirement	Succession Plan in place	Successor identified	Family's occupancy of the farm
Frank	Male	57	Mixed livestock	West	Yes	Yes	Yes (two sons)	Three generations
Luke	Male	69	Mixed livestock	West	Maybe	No	Yes (son)	Two generations
Dominic	Male	77	Mixed livestock	West	Maybe	No	Yes (son and daughter)	Two generations
Rory	Male	66	Sheep	West	No	No	No	One generation
Andrew	Male	64	Beef	West	Maybe	No	No	Six generations
David	Male	70	Beef	North West	Maybe	No	Yes (son)	Three generation
Thomas	Male	80	Sheep and tillage	North West	Yes	No	Yes (daughter)	Three generations
Sean	Male	75	Dairy and poultry	North East	No	No	Yes (son)	Three generations
Mark	Male	61	Dairy	East	No	Yes	Yes (two sons)	Three generations
Claire	Female	82	Mixed livestock and tillage	East	No	No	Yes (two sons)	Four generations
Josh	Male	70	Tillage (crop production)	South East	Yes	No	Yes (son)	12 generations
Jack	Male	72	Dairy	South East	No	No	Yes (son)	Three generations
Ian	Male	67	Dairy	South	No	No	No	Three generations
John	Male	70	Mixed livestock	South	No	No	Yes (daughter)	Three generations
Colm	Male	71	Mixed livestock	South West	No	Yes	Yes (son)	Three generations
Eimear	Female	65	Beef	South West	No	No	Yes (son)	Four generations
Brian	Male	85	Dairy	Midlands	Yes	No	Yes (son)	Seven generations
Richard	Male	67	Beef	Midlands	Yes	No	Yes (two sons)	Two generations
Aoife	Female	68	Mixed livestock	Midlands	No	No	Yes (son)	Five generations

the pattern, process and rate of intergenerational farm transfer in an Irish context being included in the 2015 Teagasc National Land Use Farm Survey. This questionnaire was conducted by Teagasc with a stratified random sample of 350 Irish farmers across a broad spectrum of farming operations, typologies, geographical location and scale, representing over 80,000 farms nationally. The strength of this additional study sample is that it represents the entire Irish farming population, irrespective of their succession intentions. As the older generation was the target population of this study, 236 survey participants qualified for analysis. In terms of quantitative data analysis, questionnaire data were analysed using frequency distribution tables and a series of cross-tabulations performed in the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences version 23 Programme. Vare et al. (2005) offer an important note of caution in interpreting such aggregate data, however, in which surveys carried out with farmers on the topic of succession 'have only a negligible value in predicting the observed behaviour', and their results may in fact mislead the direction of future policy in the area (p. 9). The quantitative questionnaire data, therefore, can only be considered as a supplementary exploration into the wider population of older Irish farmer's attitudes and intentions towards change, which strengthen and reinforce the interview participant's responses. In all, the multi-method research methodology carried out for this study was rigorous, accurate, professional and confidential, resulting in an insightful account of farmer's opinions on the intergenerational farm transfer in later life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing from the problem-centred interviews and Teagasc National Land Use Farm Survey, the empirical findings reveal that the policy challenge to incentivise and support generational renewal in agriculture is not straightforward, as 84% cent of interview participants were ill-prepared for the process by not having a succession plan in place (see Table 1). This finding is analogous with results obtained from the nationally representative sample of 236 farmers surveyed in the Teagasc Land Use Questionnaire, which found that 70% did not have a succession plan for their farms drawn up. The fact that planning effectively for succession is widely reported to be an integral part of managing a family farm business (Gill, 2013; Pitts et al., 2009) raises major concerns about this apparent lack of preparedness for generational renewal in Irish agriculture. Moreover, 59% of the Teagasc Land Use Survey respondents were found to not even have a will in place. More problematic still, 40% of farmers surveyed went so far as to point out that they hoped to retain management and ownership of their farms until death. At a basic level, collectively these findings reveal that the senior generation's reluctance and indeed resistance to alter the status quo of the existing management and ownership structure of the family farm is strong within the farming community. Such ambivalence towards succession and hesitancy to embrace change is a major concern, as it results in the younger generation having significant difficulties obtaining sufficient resources and capital to get established in farming, a situation largely unchanged in the Republic of Ireland since pioneering research was carried out in this area in the early 1970s by Commins (1973).

The overriding commonalities to emerge from the content analysis of empirical research offer an in-depth insight into why this decades-long area of contention within policy circles exists. Older farmers are found to have fears around changes to the existing methods and mode of farming upon relinquishing managerial control of the family farm to the next generation. Findings also reveal that there is a significant cohort of farmers in the Republic of Ireland who safeguard their hierarchical position and privileges on the farm across generations, simply because it is 'normal'

and/or 'common' for them to do so within the farming community. Finally, there appears to be a collective perception within the farming community that 'farmers don't retire', and those who do are not perceived to adhere to the 'good farmer' habitus. This latter consequence is largely due to farmer's ingrained beliefs about the lack of possibilities to present themselves as an active, hard-working, dedicated farmer in the farming community upon doing so. Combined, these factors illustrate that the predominant reason as to why the older generation of the farming community fail to plan effectively and expeditiously for the future is that intergenerational farm transfer is an emotional process associated with a threat to one's habitus, or their deep-seated dispositions, in later life. Interestingly, despite the patriarchal prominence of farming highlighted in previous research (Brandth, 2002; Shortall, 2014), empirical findings in this study did not uncover any great variation in the opinions and discourses of older male and female farmers towards succession and retirement.

In the next sections, the predominant themes of (i) ambivalence towards altering the existing characteristics and practices of the farm, (ii) unwillingness to restructure the hierarchical order of the farm household and (iii) fear of losing one's 'good farmer' identity and status upon engaging in the succession process to emerge from the data will be effectively portrayed in selected comments direct from the interview participants, backed up by additional findings from the Teagasc Land Use Survey. These quotes vividly communicate the habitus of the senior generation of the farming community, particularly in relation to the threat of change in later life. Research findings are then linked to relevant issues in family farm literature combined with Bourdieu's theoretical framework to augment our understanding of the underlying factors that influence the older generation's unwillingness to 'step aside' and retire from farming.

Ambivalence towards altering the status quo

One of the most significant difficulties in mobilising generational renewal in agriculture is the older farmer's concerns regarding a change in their traditional style and system of farming upon relinquishing managerial control of the family farm. In many cases, the senior generation reported during the interview process that their successor possessed conflicting dispositions and aspirations in relation to the future development of the family farm. Indeed, the prospect of the younger generation altering the status quo of the farm was found to place significant emotional stress on interview respondents. Mark, for example, a 61-year-old dairy farmer from the East of Ireland, has two sons that hope to convert the existing system of farming to a tillage enterprise in the coming years. Reflecting on what would happen to the farm in the future if his son's ambitions came to fruition, Mark became quite upset at the thoughts of selling his dairy cows as he had invested considerable time and resources throughout his life improving the herd's genetics, knowing the breeding lines of each animal on the farm:

'My own lads here want to get rid of the dairy cows and get into tillage... but I really don't know how I'd cope without my cows if they do. I started out with twenty cows back in the day, and we now have over a hundred, so a lot of hard work, time and dedication has been put in to build up the herd we have here today... To be honest, I know each and every one of my cows, even without having to read their tag numbers. You might think that is strange, but to me it not, because they all have their own distinctive markings and temperament... I even have nicknames for a few of them! Oh, I would really miss them if they were gone...'

As habitus structures one's thoughts, evaluations and actions, the older generation's opinions on the future trajectory of the farm appear to be based on unconscious dispositions towards a particular way of being rather than a conscious calculation of the potential benefits of making changes to boost the competitiveness and production efficiency of the family farm. Investigating the intricate nature of farmers' relationships with their animals, Riley (2011) previously discovered that in addition to its monetary value, the dairy herd represents 'an embodiment of their farm history, with the efforts and achievements of several generations inscribed upon them' (p. 21). The same can also be said for sheep farmers, who have often perfected the breeding and subsequent productivity of their flocks over their lifetime (Yarwood & Evans, 2006). Consequently, the livestock husbandry practices and distinctive breeding skills brought to light by interviewees appear to be etched into their habitus, leading many older farmers to ultimately reject alternative farming practices proposed by their potential successor, as to do so would totally 'go against the grain' of their existing world-views. The farm itself, therefore, cannot be just considered as a workplace or a piece of land to the farmer, but more so it represents the physical manifestation of knowledge developed and used over time by both the farmer and by those who have lived and worked there before (Conway et al., 2018; Gill, 2013). Findings from the Teagasc Land Use Questionnaire confirm such a deep-rooted attachment, with 80% of surveyed respondents agreeing that their farms, to them, have 'a greater symbolic value than economic value'. Bourdieu (1990) explains that habitus offers this sense of place, by linking deep-seated dispositions to everyday practices. Such a close relationship was very evident during the interview process as typified by Aoife, a 68-year-old mixed livestock farmer from the Midlands of Ireland:

'My farm is so important to me... It is very important because when I got this piece of land it had no sheds or nothing on it. Over the past 30 years I have built house on it, put up slatted sheds and a now have a great yard here also. I have even extended the farm by buying more land. I have actually doubled it in size since I started farming it, and that is some achievement... The farm really means everything to me this stage, and at 68 years of age I am still eager to buy more land. I am still adding to this farm's history day after day because I want to leave some sort of lasting legacy behind me when I am dead and gone'.

The older generation's reluctance to embrace change was also identified during the interview process as a significant barrier in the uptake of technological innovation on family farms. Sean, a 75-year-old dairy and poultry farmer from the North East whose son wants to install a robotic milking machine on the family farm is such an example, reflecting displeasure and even dismay at such an outcome:

'My son did a course in dairying there recently, and it has completely upset everything here ever since he did. He now wants to spend a wee fortune installing one of those robotic milking machines on the farm. I am not one bit happy about this because I don't think there is any need for one... I often think back to my own father back the day when I was a young fella starting out on the farm with plenty of new ideas. He called a halt to most of them though, and while I thought he was just being a stubborn old mule at the time, I began to realise that his ways made a lot of sense as the years went on. They made sense because they worked well. Call me old fashioned, but I think I am now the one making sense here. I am going to stand my ground on this whole robotic milking idea...'

Such conservative sentiments appear to be embedded in the cumulatively constituted habitus of the older farmer, thus equipping them with an internal guideline for choosing one farming practice over another. This concept, therefore, helps explain why ‘older farmers often perceive changes proposed by the previously subordinate younger generation to the existing farm business’ managerial and operational practices as unnecessary and aversive’ (Conway et al., 2017, p. 70).

Change in hierarchical ranking

In addition to the senior generation’s fear of change in relation to the existing operational practices and physical characteristics of the farm business, empirical findings reveal a divergence of opinion and uncertainty between farm transfer expectations and farm transfer realisations. This is the case even for those farmers who already have, or are planning in theory, to transfer over managerial duties and ownership to the next generation. This disposition results in the decision to relinquish control of the farm being difficult to execute and follow through. The contradictory and conflicting desires held by older farmers towards farm transfer is aptly illustrated by a 65-year-old beef farmer Eimear from the South West of Ireland, who deems it essential to maintain an authoritative role, despite having transferred the farm over to her son:

‘I have transferred the farm to my son alright, but the worst problem with that is that my son is very quiet you see. I mean, even though he might be wanting to do something on the farm, if he thought I wanted to do something else he wouldn’t be inclined to want to sway me like. Maybe that’s my own fault though... probably actually is. Like I know that I probably shouldn’t always be trying to dictate what’s going on, but I do have to put my point across, and 99 times out of 100 he does listen to me...’.

Bourdieu (1984) explains that habitus is instrumental in reproducing class and power relations, such as the hierarchical power dynamics at play within family farm households brought to light here. Habitus invokes a process of socialisation whereby the dominant modes of thought and experience to which they are exposed are internalised by individuals, and these are continuously reinforced by their experiences and social interactions (Shortall, 2014; Shucksmith & Herrmann, 2002). Smith (2001) adds that habitus equips groups with the ‘desires, motivation, knowledge, skill, routine and strategies that will reproduce their inferior [or superior] status’ (p. 136). Pitts et al. (2009) also pointed to how the ‘senior generation might be reluctant to engage in succession planning, as surrendering control of the farm relegates them to a more peripheral role’ (p. 61). This resistance by the senior generation towards ‘fading into the background’ in later life was also evident in the Teagasc Land Use Questionnaire findings, with 68% of the 71 farmers surveyed (who claimed to have had a succession plan in place) also indicating that they ‘would like to continue farming for as long as possible’. Moreover, 34% of these farmers hoped to retain management and ownership of their farm until their death.

Another problematic trend to emerge from the interview process was the revelation that many farmers had only obtained managerial control and ownership of their farms upon the death of their own parents, and therefore had/have no intention of relinquishing managerial control and ownership of the family farm at the traditional retirement age of 65 (which is in the Republic of Ireland). Such dispositions not to act on farm succession and retirement, therefore, appear to have been influenced by family farm transfer practices over the generations. As Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is founded on the idea that the human mind operates within set limits that are

'socially bounded, socially structured', the experiences and upbringing of individuals thus play a major role in how they build their life (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126). Hillier and Rooksby (2005) argue that habitus provides a frame of reference in which actors undertake an evaluation of options not 'as a conscious pattern of rational thought, but rather an intuitive practical reaction to a situation based on experience' (p. 22). Older farmers interviewed as part of this research thus justified their reluctance to relinquish control of the farm in later life as simply following the tradition, or 'rules', set out by their own experience of intergenerational farm transfer. Succession planning in particular was found to be out of harmony with their exiting habitus; in fact, this process was identified as being in conflict with the farming habitus. David, a 70-year-old beef farmer from the North West of Ireland, and Dominic, a 77-year-old mixed livestock farmer from the West of Ireland, are clearly illustrative of this:

'There's a lot of talk about succession planning and transferring the farm these days, but I really don't see what all the fuss is about... It all happens naturally like... You see, even though I inherited the farm from my late father, I don't really own the farm, the farm owns me. You see, you are tied into a long family history when you live on a farm'. (David)

'Would ya believe, I am 77 years of age and I am still buying land. I often ask myself why am I such a fool to work so hard like this... But the truth is, I am doing it for the next generation, just as my mother and father did it for me. I am doing it to put future generations of this family on a pedestal... so why wouldn't I put the head down and battle on'. (Dominic)

These quotes further exemplify the way in which dominant modes of thought and experience inherent in the lifeworld of family farming, mediated into the farming habitus, can overpower contemporary policies and structures aimed at stimulating and enticing generational renewal. In this way, Bourdieu (1990) explains how habitus serves to generate and reinforce practices that are considered by a social group (i.e., farming community in the content of this research) as 'correct', or as the socially accepted forms of behaviour, guaranteeing 'constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms' (p. 54).

Whilst the potential successor's slow rate of progress up the so-called 'succession ladder' (Errington, 2002) appears to be rooted in the farming habitus, the younger farmer's struggles to evolve into a more formidable role in the family business can also lead to potential frustration, tension and poor relations between both generations (Ingram & Kirwan, 2011). To further complicate matters, and in line with findings from this research, Keating (1996) previously noted that many older farmers do not view their continued involvement in the family farm business as an impediment to their children's personal and career aspirations. This study revealed that such behavioural norms exist within family farm households due to the 'rules' of the intergenerational farm transfer 'game', which have become internalised within the farming habitus over time. The older generation's entrenchment on the family farm is aptly illustrated by an 85-year-old dairy farmer Brian, from the Midlands of Ireland, who transferred ownership of the family farm to his son but continues to manage the farm's financial affairs:

'I couldn't even imagine stepping aside completely and letting my son do as he pleases. How could I have my own child making all the financial decisions around

here... What I am saying is it wouldn't work if I wasn't the one who had the final say on what to buy, and what not to buy on this farm. I am not at that kind of handover stage yet, definitely not'.

This illustrates the deep-rooted legitimacy and justification of control wielded by the senior generation within family farm households. Such narratives, heavily authoritarian in nature, are again a product of the older farmer's habitus, an 'often unconscious process related to the inter-nalisation of a cultural arbitrary' (Cushion & Jones, 2006, p. 158).

Threat to the 'good farmer' habitus

A reoccurring theme throughout the research was the perception amongst the senior generation of the farming community that 'farmers don't retire'. Indeed, farmers who farm for as long as possible and 'die with their boots on' were revered by interview participants. This ideology appears to be embedded in the habitus of those being interviewed, resulting in the thoughts of 'stepping aside' from farming and being 'retired' difficult for older farmers to accept. This existing cultural expectation within the farming community is brought to light by Jack, a 72-year-old dairy farmer from the South East of Ireland, who explains that those who do retire are generally perceived amongst their peers to be lazy and have a defeatist attitude, as such practices do not adhere to the traditional farming habitus:

'Ah it's not normal in the farming community to retire. It would actually be a fairly strange thing to do. Farmers hate the word retirement to be honest, they actually detest the word, so don't say it to them!... I think farmers should be left to tip away and do whatever they like on their farms, no matter how old or frail they are, because other farmers will respect ya for doing that, it's just how it is'.

The senior generation appears accustomed to the fact that farmers gain the respect and approval of others within the farming community by conforming to such practices in later life. Their habitus thus disposes them to act habitually in this manner. This powerful, somewhat territorial, drive to hold onto one's farm at all costs while taking risks, enduring hardship and pain, is closely correlated with the 'good farmer' identity concept (Burton, 2004; Burton et al., 2020; Riley, 2011, 2016; Shucksmith, 1993). This construct provides an explanation for why many farmers' self-concept tends to be so influenced and indeed dominated by 'production-orientated' identities (Burton & Wilson, 2006, p. 95). To be perceived as a 'good farmer' within a community of like-minded farmers sharing a common habitus, a combination of hard work (Slee et al., 2006) and skilfully performed farming activities and behaviours (Burton, 2004, p. 201) generate symbolic capital, which in turn contributes to the social status and prestige of the farmer (Burton et al., 2008; Yarwood & Evans, 2006). As the 'audience' (or significant others) for farmers is widely reported to be neighbouring farmers, Conway et al. (2016) explain how a key element of symbolic capital for many older farmers includes being recognised as an active and productive farmer in society amongst their farming peers. Such recognition ultimately contributes to the senior generations overall sense of self and purpose in later life.

As symbolic capital is situational, Christian and Bloome (2004) explain that the symbolic capital assigned to a person in one field may not necessarily carry over into another if it does not align with the habitus or 'rules of the game' within a particular social group. Empirical findings

reflected this sentiment by revealing that the older generation fears letting go of their productivist identity, becoming a retiree and ultimately becoming dependent on others, feeling they would be putting their lifetime accretion of symbolic capital as a 'good farmer' at risk. The resultant outcome leads many to resist and indeed reject engaging in the process, even where it represents economic common sense to do so (Conway et al., 2017; Whitehead et al., 2012). Policy advocating for generational renewal in agriculture, therefore, sits very uncomfortably alongside the symbolic capital required by the farming community in later life. The influential role that symbolic capital, and its association with the 'good farmer' identity, plays on human dynamics influencing and hindering intergenerational farm transfer decision-making is brought to light by Luke, a 69-year-old mixed livestock farmer from the West of Ireland and 70-year-old John, also a mixed livestock farmer from the South of Ireland:

'Farmers are known far and wide to be hard workers, and that's a tag we are proud of. I wouldn't like if someone thought I wasn't a busy farmer... I know I might be a bit weaker and slower than I used to be back in the day, but I still know a good beast when I see one, and I am even still well able to shear some of the ewes we have here in the summer. Ah health wise too I think it's important for us older folk to be active like that'. (Luke)

Retirement doesn't mean anything to me, because I would never do it. Oh, it would be fierce boring to be retired I'd say. You'd eventually go mad I'd say... There is an owl farmer back the road from me here that I often visit, oh he must be 92 years of age, and is still a great farmer. Oh boy nobody would dare tell him that he should retire, because he won't do it!... He is a mighty man, and please god I'll be as with it and as hardy as he is if I live to be his age'. (John)

As habitus is an internalised structure of social rules, equipping individuals with a conservative predisposition to act in a particular way (Yarwood & Evans, 2006), such sentiments, common across all interviews, clearly demonstrate how older farmers' struggle to come to terms with the prospect of 'stepping aside' from farming. The inherent desire to continue farming is evident in the Teagasc Land Use Survey, which indicates that 77% of those surveyed 'would like to continue farming for as long as physically possible'. Moreover, 85% of those surveyed had no idea what they would do if, as requested by the most recent unsuccessful ERS for farmers in the Republic of Ireland (Conway et al., 2016), they 'permanently ceased all farming activity'. These findings indicate that policymakers will continue to experience difficulties in persuading older farmers to plan for succession and eventually retire; as such, actions are simply not imprinted into the farming habitus. Such practices do not fit with established attitudes, objectives and social relations in the farming community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research reveal that the attitudes and behaviour required to transfer managerial control and ownership of the family farm to the next generation and retire from farming has two main considerations. Primarily, not only does it 'go against the grain' of the older farmers' habitus, appearing to them to be instinctively 'wrong', but it also is seen to be incompatible with

what is necessary to earn recognition as a 'good farmer' within the farming community. Indeed, older farmers appear to be internally conditioned to reject retirement. Such unwillingness to 'step aside' and retire from farming in later life is a major concern, however, as it displaces the ambitions and long-term objectives of younger farmers.

Based on the evidence accrued, we contend that the challenge for generational renewal in agriculture policy is, therefore, twofold. It must consider methods in which the older farmer's habitus towards the succession process can be influenced in the interest of whatever 'good' is at hand (in this case to bring about a culture within the farming community that recognises the necessity of handing over of the farm business to the next generation in a timely manner), and to remain cognizant that such efforts have the potential to act against the good at hand (which, in this case, would provoke anxiety and stress amongst the older generation as they struggle to 'let go' of their productivist self-image in later life).

This research follows Shucksmith (1993) and Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) in arguing that influencing the existing farming habitus identified in this research cannot be achieved through changes in policy alone. It also needs to be linked to wider societal trends, with shifts in agricultural policy acting as catalysts. For example, as the senior generation of the farming community's lifelong accumulation of symbolic capital appears to be vested in the status and esteem in which he/she is held amongst their peers as a 'good', actively engaged farmer, policies that erode this capital base and fail to comply with the traditional 'rules' of the intergenerational farm transfer 'game' identified in this research are likely to be disregarded. Therefore, we argue that until there is a closer congruence of generational renewal policy aspirations and the habitus of older farmers, the progress towards increased levels of succession and land mobility in Irish agriculture will be an incremental process.

Whilst this study acknowledges that there are no uniform or easily prescribed solutions to address this complex challenge, the deeply ingrained 'rural ideology' within the farming community that prioritises keeping the farm within the family (Whitehead et al., 2012) indicates that the formulation of intergenerational farm transfer measures, which augment rather than detract from the senior generation's cache, and ongoing assembly of symbolic capital is by no means impossible. The critical forces identified here, however, which interfere with and in many cases prevent the policy from achieving this goal, call for more innovative and impactful approaches towards stimulating efficient and effective succession planning skills, in order for this process to become embodied in the habitus of the farming community. The fact that habitus is not considered to be fixed or permanent, but rather has the potential to change, be it gradually, over the course of a farmer's lifetime (Shortall, 2014), indicates that a cultural shift in thinking towards succession and retirement must be confronted at an earlier life stage in order to indoctrinate a new habitus in the farming community that will help abate the exiting ambivalence towards the process and thus help to bring about long-term resolutions.

There must be a catalyst that stimulates the need to act on this process, however. Therefore, rather than focusing solely on individual farmers or state policy-making at the national or international level, we suggest that the introduction of a 'Farm Succession Planning' module, as part of the necessary curriculum to obtain a qualification in agriculture at the college level, is one way in which the collective behaviours, attitudes and perceptions amongst members of the farming community towards the traditional ground-rules of intergenerational farm transfer can be influenced over time to bring about much-needed change in attitudes towards succession. As an individual's habitus is generally acquired through a gradual process of inculcation in which experiences during one's earlier life stage is particularly important (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 12), this proposed addition to the agricultural curriculum, with a particular focus on coursework and assignments

geared towards stimulating open lines of intergenerational communication within farm households regarding the future of the farm, can potentially help 'normalise' succession planning within the farming community, whether they are currently in the process of farm succession planning or not. This in turn would replace what is currently 'unthinkable' within the farming community, which currently seems the case for many older farmers. Tackling the succession taboo through such education measures has the potential to set in motion a long-term perception and acceptance amongst both generations that actively thinking about and addressing the succession process is 'the right thing to do' in order to secure the future of the family farm. Indeed, Bourdieu (2005) points out that while habitus is very difficult to change, it may be transformed through a process of such awareness and pedagogic effort. Waterson (2005) adds that the accrual of new knowledge and experiences, especially through education, have the potential to influence one's habitus by bringing consciousness to aspects of their deep-seated cultural dispositions, which may require change. More important still, the hope would be that successfully planning and implementing the succession process would eventually constitute a key part of what it takes to become a 'good farmer' in the eyes of the farming community.

CONCLUSION

As the low rate of intergenerational farm transfer and resultant high age profile of the farming population not only have a national and European dimension, but also a global one, the in-depth, nuanced understanding of the complex emotional forces that prevent and interfere with farm succession and retirement brought to light here is very timely. The most important contribution of this article to current needs and priorities within generational renewal in agriculture policy and research lies in its empirical insights, which demonstrate the appropriateness and importance of utilising Bourdieu's notion of habitus in helping to unpack and uncover the various facets governing the mindset of the senior generation of the farming community towards change in later life. The discovery that engaging in the intergenerational farm transfer process is associated with a threat to one's habitus in later life, or their deep-seated dispositions or learned behaviours, which provide them with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives, is a major concern and calls for the immediate development of more appropriate and sophisticated generational renewal in agriculture policy interventions and strategies that understand the world as farmers perceive it. Viewing the existing succession conundrum in farming through this lens will in turn help the policy generate answers and solutions, in a sensitive manner, to the many uncertainties and, indeed, problems surrounding the future needs not only of the older generation of the farming community but also their successors in waiting.

The recommendations set forth in this study follow Bourdieu (1990) in arguing that 'to change the world' (p. 23) in such a manner, one must change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced. In manoeuvring farmers into a new psyche of farm succession and retirement, through the implementation of research-informed policy such as this, a different space will be fashioned whereby individuals eventually come to 'respond creatively' when their habitus is 'no longer suited to the new context' (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012, p. 235). This approach can lead to fresh knowledge and innovative practices being generated in response to the need to adjust the 'rules' of the intergenerational farm transfer 'game'. The resultant indoctrination of a new habitus within the farming community, one that accepts and reverses regularised practices of the delegation of managerial responsibilities and ownership of the family farm to one's successor at an earlier life stage whilst

still allowing the older generation to maintain an active and productive role on their farms in later life, will positively contribute to the structural development and economic growth of the farming sector in an era of unprecedented transition in global agriculture.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the NUI Galway.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest to declare for this submission.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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