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Cultivating narratives: Cultivating successors – A Reply to Steiger et al

Steiger *et al*'s article *Cultivating narratives: Cultivating successors* continues to develop an under-researched and increasingly relevant topic, particularly given the benefit many commentators believe is to be derived from 'effective succession', in terms of the delivery of the food security agenda (Lobley *et al*, 2010). Although Steiger and colleagues make an important empirical contribution to our understanding of succession, a topic that, despite its prevalence, we actually know surprisingly little about (Dyck *et al*, 2002; Lobley and Baker, 2012), I remain troubled by their uncritical acceptance that small farming is sustainable, their use of the term 'small family farm', their equivocal definition of the 'successor' and their failure to understand the nature and purpose of Gasson and Errington's typology. This brief note offers an opportunity to explore these points, which I hope offers a vehicle through which researchers can continue to engage with, and refine understanding of, the increasingly important topic of intergenerational farm succession.

Steiger *et al* begin their discussion by posing the age old question 'why save the family farm' and continue by suggesting there are 'at least three reasons to be concerned' about its future, including *sustainability, food security* and *demographics*.

They claim that 'stewardship' is "a value inherent to the small family farm" (90). This is somewhat problematic, as whilst evidence does suggest "more conservative, traditional values of 'leaving the land better than you found it' and 'preserving the beauty of the countryside'" are "regarded more highly by small family farmers" (Gasson, 1974: 131), this greater inclination towards conservation does not *necessarily* translate into action. For example, in a survey of 504 British farms, in 1993, only 6 per cent of very small farms (<20 ha), and 10 per cent of small farms (20-50 ha) were enrolled in an agri-environmental

scheme, compared with 44 per cent of large farms (>200 ha) (Lobley, 2000). The debate surrounding the value of small farms is wide, and the complexities of the debate are explored in greater detail elsewhere (see Lobley, 1997; 2000, Potter and Lobley, 1993); but the point I wish to convey is that one cannot simply assume 'stewardship' is "a value inherent to the small family farm" (Steiger *et al*, 2012: 90) when in reality, it "appears to be a clustering of attributes, some behavioural, others situational, that contributes to a farm's conservation value" (Lobley, 2000: 600) and to assume otherwise, as Steiger *et al* (2012) do, simply undermines their argument.

It is neither my intention to question nor discredit the value of the small family farm. On the contrary, I am a strong advocate of the family farm, particularly in the context of the incipient but nonetheless totemic food security challenge. It is refreshing to see Stegier *et al* also note the importance of the family farm in delivering food security and they effectively describe the food security challenge, recognising that achieving "food security goes beyond food availability to also encompass agricultural diversity, regional prosperity, environmental integrity, biodiversity, and the predictability and fairness of the system of production, sale and delivery" (90). Steiger and colleagues continue by noting the difference of food security between the developing world and the nutritionally poor North and propose that "fresh foods are more nutritious, and fresh foods are *more likely* delivered locally by *smaller family farms*" (90, emphasis added). This statement is problematic in two ways. Firstly, despite popularisation of the notion that local foods are more nutritious, it is widely observed that *all* the factors affecting nutritional quality of produce, including production method, post-harvest handling, storage, processing and packaging, apply *equally* to produce that is produced locally or elsewhere. Whilst Steiger *et al*'s claim mirrors calls from advocates of

local food “to reappraise the role of local food [...] in terms of its potential to integrate the needs of environmental sustainability, nutrition and social justice” (Kirwan and Maye, 2012: 6), it is a simplistic and unsupported supposition that fuels the false dichotomy between ‘local-good’ and ‘global-bad’, and ignores appeals in the literature to view the value of local food systems in the context of careful evidence-based research (Winter, 2003; Coley *et al*, 2009). Secondly, Steiger *et al* further confound this qualification by stating that nutritious foods are more likely to be delivered by smaller family farms; this authoritatively implies, the smaller the family farm, the fresher and therefore more nutritionally rich the produce is, yet I am aware of no evidence to support this notion. I therefore ask Steiger and colleagues, what they mean by the *small* family farm? And propose they are actually referring, more generally to the ‘family farm’, a term which often wrongly, implies a smaller farm. In addition, I suggest the concept of ‘familiness’, as offered by Lobley and Baker (2012), defined as the close link between family and business, would be more fitting, as although not explicitly linked to nutritional benefits, is associated with a host of benefits including the transfer of firm-specific knowledge and detailed knowledge of the farm, including its microclimate and idiosyncrasies, which are important benefits given the proclaimed need to sustainably ‘exploit spare capacity in farming’ (Potter, 2009: 53).

Steiger *et al* continue conveying their concern for the small family farm, by pronouncing, with considerable authority that “young people are not farming” (90). This claim again neglects the wealth of literature that debates the supposed ‘crisis in succession’. Although, as revealed by Lobley, Baker and Whitehead (2010) in their international comparison of succession and retirement patterns, U.S. states, had lower rates of succession compared with England and Canada, this does not *categorically* show that “young people are not

farming” with the percentage of respondents identifying a successor ranging from twenty-six, to thirty-two per cent across the five U.S. states included in the survey.

Although Steiger and colleagues derive benefit from interviews with both “current farmers who had inherited the farm” and “likely future successors”, providing what they describe as a “three-generation view of some of these farms” (96), I believe given the varying political, economic and cultural contexts that would have influenced these different generations, the experience of one generation of successors are likely to have differed, perhaps significantly, from the next. This distinction is more than a convoluted semantic debate, but serves to highlight ‘the successor’ and ‘the likely future successor’ represent different generations who are likely to have contrasting experiences of the succession process.

As Whitehead, Lobley and Baker (2012: 314) summarise, “the economic, social and environmental setting for farming businesses has changed dramatically in the last three decades”, so will the experiences of ‘the successor’ and ‘the likely future successor’. Conflating the experiences of current ‘successors’ with ‘likely future successors’, as Steiger *et al* do, also fails to recognise the ‘likely future successor’ as an autonomous actor and highlights their reprehensible absence in the wider succession literature, where they remain the subject of “passing references, most commonly framed through the words of parents” (Riley, 2009: 246), despite empirical work by Riley (2009) which highlighted, *even as children*, future successors, are powerful and active actors, with distinctive experiences and narratives.

Steiger *et al* recognise there is “much scholarly research on farm succession” (96), including categorization of the outcomes of succession and/or the process. They directly refer to a typology offered by Lobley, Baker and Whitehead (2010). However, the typology Steiger and

colleagues refer to is actually Gasson and Errington's (1993) 'four ideal types', which is accompanied by a comprehensive account, and is merely referred to by Lobley, Baker and Whitehead, rendering much of the ensuing criticisms from Steiger *et al*, unnecessary as these had been explicated in the original literature. Steiger *et al*'s main criticism, that "the process and types of successors may not be as clean as suggested by Lobley, Baker and Whitehead" (96), is undoubtedly valid, but fails to take heed of Gasson and Errington's (1993: 206) original typology and literature, in which they repeatedly stress, was only intended to "represent ideal types". Steiger and colleagues outline each succession type in turn, illuminating the examples with a series of verbatim quotes that follows through on their intention to 'listen to' and 'respect' the farmer as the "expert on his or her experiences of the situation" (93). Steiger *et al* return to the inadequacy of the typology and suggest how some succession routes reflect a 'combination' of the ideal routes and how some successor routes "defy the categorization suggested by Lobley, Baker and Whitehead (2010)" (97). In doing so it would seem that Steiger and colleagues have failed to engage with the founding literature; literature that in anticipation of these criticisms, clearly emphasises how "in reality, the patterns of succession are many and varied and each may have some element of more than one ideal type" (Gasson and Errington, 1993: 206). This is not to deny that some succession routes may lie outside the categorization, but as the literature surrounding the 'four ideal types' makes clear, they were never intended or expected to capture every empirically observable succession route. In the context of Gasson and Errington's work, Steiger *et al*'s criticisms of what they refer to as Lobley, Baker and Whitehead's typology, are unnecessary and ultimately detract from the intrinsic value of their empirical findings, which appear to be used to prove the typology wrong, rather than contribute to scholarly understanding of succession.

Steiger *et al* found that six out of sixteen, farmers in their study fit the ‘farmers boy’ type, but continue by claiming “some of the ‘farmer’s boys’ show good business and managerial skills and high motivation” (99) and “do not seem to be as unwilling to change and incorporate new business strategies as Lobley, Baker, and Whitehead (2010) fear” (102). The surprising level of business and managerial skills, as well as the pleasing level of motivation of the ‘farmers’ boy’ is a potentially important finding, particularly in the context of the multitude of contemporary challenges facing the industry and warrants further discussion; why were these potential successors showing surprising levels of business and managerial skills? The discussion of gender interestingly revealed that “wives were active partners in the business” who brought “good business and managerial skills, motivation and creativity to the operation” (99) and made up for the ‘farmers’ boys’ inadequacies. This is an important conclusion and I ask Steiger and colleagues, in policy and extension terms, what could this mean?

Despite producing a wealth of “both surprising and illuminating” results (Steiger *et al*, 2012: 102), and responding to the “need to develop a clearer understanding of the process of intergenerational transfer in countries across the globe” (Lobley, Baker and Whitehead, 2010: 61), the main conclusion of Steiger and colleagues’ research curiously remains concerned with how their “oral history data did not completely fit with the succession categories” (102). Although they uncritically assert that small farming is sustainable, conflate the experiences of the successor with the likely future successor, and purvey an incomplete view of the literature by neglecting the work the work of longstanding observers of the family farm, Gasson and Errington (1993), implicit throughout the article is an enduring and relevant belief that the adequacy of the transfer of managerial control, can

make a *genuine* contribution in rising to the 'challenges of the future' (Lobley *et al*, 2010: 60). As aptly stated by Potter and Lobley (1996: 305) "in the patterns of succession today can be read the shape of farming futures to come"; the intentions of potential successors, and transfer arrangements in place, will undoubtedly shape farming futures. As the global population is set to reach 9 billion by mid-century, and demand for food is expected to grow by up to 70 per cent, it is perhaps now, more so than ever, we need to strive for a more rigorous and detailed understanding of the process of succession. It is however paramount that future research strives to make an accurate and well-supported case for the family farm, appreciates the uniqueness of the pressures influencing the succession process at this time, and engages with and builds on foregoing literature.

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