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# **“It’s Definitely a Good Time to Be a Farmer”: Understanding the Changing Dynamics of Successor Creation in Late Modern Society\***

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**ABSTRACT** This article considers the implications of the wider systemic shift from modernity to late modernity for the process of intergenerational farm transfer. The article argues that the shift from the collective to the individual, indicative of late modern society, is particularly pertinent in the context of intergenerational transfer, which has long been rooted in collective thinking. Drawing on the perspectives of incumbent farmers and potential successors, the article utilizes results from semistructured interviews with 29 farmers and 19 potential successors in Devon, England. Using a thematic analysis, the article provides a nuanced understanding of the impact of the systemic shift and the associated emphasis on the individual on successor identification. Although the article reaffirms understanding of successor creation as a collective process, determined by factors such as gender and birth order, it also identifies an emergent cohort of younger potential successors, for whom succession was the outcome of an evaluation of farming as a career. It concludes that, within the case study area, modernization is changing the way in which farm children are identifying themselves as “the successor.” The article suggests how this increasingly judicious approach to succession leaves reproduction of the family farm increasingly vulnerable to negative externalities.

## **Introduction**

Late modern society in advanced capitalist countries is characterized by an increasing emphasis on the individual. Recognition in the wider sociology literature of an epochal transformation from modernity to a new stage of modernization, understood as late or reflexive modernization (Beck 1994), has offered a powerful explanatory framework across

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the social sciences. Emerging in the 1970s and particularly evident from the 1980s (Gullestad 1997), the transition was marked by the dissolution of social institutions based on class, gender, and the family, forcing individuals to “produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves” (Beck 1994:13). The dissolution of these groupings, characteristic of late modernity, means the individual’s identity is no longer grounded in the safety of collective structures such as the family or community; individuals are instead forced to choose how to be and how to act (Giddens 1994).

The shift from the collective to the individual is particularly pertinent in the context of intergenerational farm succession. In short, the supposed diminishing importance of collective structures threatens the relevance of the family farming tradition and ultimately, the ability of the family farm to reproduce itself over successive generations. In its most basic sense, intergenerational farm succession represents the renewal of the family farm and refers to the process of the transfer of managerial control through generations. It typically, but not always, involves the transfer of ownership. It has long been understood to be intricately rooted in both tradition and a commitment to the family collective (de Haan 1994; Gasson and Errington 1993; Gill 2013). In addition to being the subject of significant research in the more general family business literature (see for example Handler [1994], who provides a rigorous review of family business succession research), it is increasingly identified in the agricultural sociology literature as an important process, shaping the industry structure and occupancy of the land. Patrilineal succession requires one child (typically the eldest son) to continue in the capacity as the farmer and also requires nonsucceeding siblings to facilitate the succession by conceding any desire to take a share of the farm (Cassidy and McGrath 2014). In its most basic sense, the shift from the collective to the individual inherent to late modern society threatens to undermine the process of intergenerational farm transfer, which has been characterized by “family farm thinking” and facilitated by the precedence of collective or familial goals over individual ones (Villa 1999). Consequently, the family farming literature has begun to consider the impact of this systemic change on the process of intergenerational farm transfer (Brandth and Overrein 2013; Fischer and Burton 2014; Villa 1999), prompting projections of a decline in the successful intergenerational transfer of family farms.

While empirical investigation has challenged the veracity of the succession “crisis” (Adas et al. 2004; Lobley et al. 2005; Price and Conn 2012) and has led some to suggest “crisis may be too strong a word”

(Lobley 2010:849), the actuality of this crisis continues to be debated in the literature (see exchanges between Chiswell and Lobley [2015] and Burton and Fischer [2015]). In contrast, some commentators have speculated that a recent (re)emergence of food security as a policy objective in industrialized countries such as the United Kingdom has ameliorated negativity and even roused interest among next-generation farmers (Carruthers, Winter, and Evans 2013; Whitehead, Lobley, and Baker 2012). However, fears over declining farm incomes, successive policy reforms, and financial and regulatory uncertainty in the wake of Brexit continue to spark further concern about the appeal of farming to the next generation.

It is worth noting at this point that, despite ongoing structural adjustment in UK agriculture (including changes in the number and size of farm holdings), familial intergenerational transfer remains the main entry route into farming (Lobley and Baker 2012).

With the aim of developing an up-to-date and nuanced understanding of how the shift from the collective to the individual, indicative of late modernity, is materializing at the individual farm level, this article draws on empirical work with incumbent farmers (i.e., those with current managerial control over the farm) and their potential successors. While much research has focused on incumbent farm principals, some scholars have argued that insufficient engagement with potential successors (defined here as someone who could potentially gain managerial control of the farm) has prevented a full understanding of intergenerational farm transfer (Chiswell 2016).

By way of contextualizing this debate, we begin by exploring late modernity and its characteristics by drawing on the wider sociology literature. We then explore the concept of intergenerational farm transfer as a cultural requirement in the British farming context and highlight the need to consider the relationship between wider social change and intergenerational transfer in both academic and policy contexts. In our discussion of the empirical findings from farmer and potential successor interviews, which is situated in the individualization thesis, we seek to document the impact the systemic shift has had on interest in and perceptions of intergenerational farm transfer. The article observes two distinct groups of potential successors: older, “born-to-be-farmers” and younger, “qualitative evaluators,” which it frames within the modernization thesis. The specific research question addressed in the context of this article is: How is wider societal change impacting on intergenerational farm transfer and successor identification?

### **Societal Change and the Family Farm**

#### **From the Collective to the Individual: Societal Change in Western Industrial Nations**

In premodern or traditional society, the individual was generally insignificant, with decisions largely made at the collective level and behaviors that deviated from community or familial norms considered deviant (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This began to wane in response to industry's growing demand for an increasingly mobile workforce, which "released people from fixed ties of family, neighbourhood and occupation" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:31). Beginning in the early seventeenth century (Giddens 1991), modernization marked the start of the gradual shift from collective responsibility to individual precedence. Despite the shift in emphasis, behavior remained predominantly organized by collective structures such as the class system, gender roles, and the family in a period Giddens describes as a "collaboration" between modernity and tradition. It was the later and further disintegration of these structures—a product of modernization's inherent dynamism—that began to distinguish this later phase of modernity apart from its earlier form. Occurring surreptitiously in an unchanged and intact political and economic order, the emergent phase of modernization was understood as a triumph of its own success. Specifically, social institutions based on class, gender, and the family began to lose their authority. To use Giddens's terminology, collective institutions as sources of guidance were systematically disembedded (taken away) and reembedded (replaced), "not by a void but rather by a new type of conducting and arranging life—no longer obligatory and 'embedded' in traditional models" (Beck 1994:14). The dissolution of these groupings, which began to emerge in the 1970s in the Western world, means that unlike before, individuals were forced to autonomously "produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck 1994:13). An individual's identity was no longer grounded in the safety of the family or community. Instead, society forced individuals to actively construct, organize, and re-create their own identities (Giddens 1991). In this sense, reflexive is "responsive" or "reactive."

It is necessary to note at this point the different terms used to refer to the later, established phase of modernity. Initially, Bauman (1987) described a shift to "post-modernity" but later acknowledged the term was "flawed" by implying modernity was in fact over, and subsequently preferred the term "liquid modernity." Beck (1994, 2006) used the terms "second modernity" and later the "cosmopolitan society," while Giddens has employed various terms, including both "second" and

“high modernity” (Giddens 1991) as well as “late modernity.” Gullestad (2004:8) recognized the difficulties associated with the various terminology used to describe (essentially) the (same) emergent social epoch, asserting “all these theorists argue that there are profound wide-ranging constellations of changes occurring globally since World War II.” In response to these difficulties, she instead referred to the transition from “classic modernity” to a “transformed modernity,” which she suggests emerged from around the 1970s and early 1980s in Western society (Gullestad 1996, 1997, 2004).

Without the security of collectively based institutions telling individuals what “should be done,” the individual was forced to become the “actor, designer, juggler and stage director of his or her own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions” (Beck 1994:14). Beck (1994) terms this shift in emphasis “individualization,” which simultaneously encapsulates the disintegration of many of the certainties of industrial society and the resulting need to find and invent new certainties for oneself in their absence. Linked to Beck’s concept of individualization is the “do it yourself biography,” whereby, as a result of the fragmentation of social institutions individuals are required to construct their own lives, and encouraged to believe they can do what they want to do. It is important to consider that individualization does not denote the free decisions of individuals but, paradoxically, to use Jean-Paul Sartre’s phrasing, means individuals are *condemned* to individualization (see Dawson 2013).

Despite significant contribution to social theory, the concept of individualization is not without criticism. Much of the criticism concerns Beck’s overestimation of the role of the individual in constructing his or her own life story (Pilkington 2007) and the coinciding underestimation of inequitable distribution of resources (Lash 1994). In their empirical exploration of youth transitions, Furlong and Cartmel (1997:6) conclude that, “whilst transitions may now . . . involve a greater sense of personal choice and responsibility, there has been no clear break with the modernist period [in] which social reproduction was so heavily reliant upon the determining power of class and other inequalities.” Similarly, with a specific focus on the supposed freedom from gender specificity of the social life course, Chisholm and Du Bois-Reymond (1993:272) observed notable discrepancies between what young women thought they could do and what they were able to achieve. While many participants intended to pursue high-level paid work, as well as have a family, empirical evidence suggested they were prevented from doing so by factors such as the provision of child care. They criticize the alacrity with which the research community has adopted the concept of

individualization, suggesting that rather than a shift in individuals' abilities to accomplish things, it is more likely that "an individualisation of expectations might well have taken place." They reconcile these notions, asserting instead, "social background and cultural milieu may no longer shape a person's *aspirations and expectations*, hopes and plans, to the same extent that they used to do" (272, emphasis added). In the context of intergenerational farm transfer, this freedom from tradition is important to the socialization of successors and the reconceptualization of successor creation presented in this article.

No longer bound to what Adams (2003:222) describes as "fixed culturally given identity positions," the individual has "opportunity to construct self-identity without the shackles of tradition and culture." The ensuing section explores why this shift from the collective to the individual is potentially so significant for intergenerational farm transfer and the ability of the family farm to reproduce itself.

### **Intergenerational Farm Transfer as a Cultural Requirement**

The tradition that I was part of required one child from the farming family to continue on as a farmer. For me, the power of tradition meant that in some ways the choice to become a farmer was never consciously made.

—Kuehne 2013:204

There is a vast literature exploring the continuing and powerful cultural requirement for generation after generation to remain on the farm. Stemming from manor-dominated areas in Europe where lords favored single-heir inheritance in order to maintain economic viability (de Haan 1994), the practice of leaving all their land to the eldest son has become a long-established tradition for English landowners.

The concept of "cultural scripts," defined as "a culturally shared expression, story or common line of argument, or an expected unfolding of events, that is deemed to be appropriate or to be expected" (Vanclay and Enticott 2011:260), is useful in understanding intergenerational farm transfer as a long-standing cultural requirement and the product of collective thinking. Silvasti (2003) identified the "script" of passing the farm onto successive generations as the most significant norm in the family farming tradition, acting as a perpetual and acute "organizing force" for all members of the family farm. The script, Silvasti notes, forces farming parents to allocate the role of the successor to one of their children, typically the eldest son, to ensure that an

economically viable farm is retained within the family for a subsequent generation. Specifically, cultural scripts act as a way of delimiting the views, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals in the family farm context (Cassidy and McGrath 2014).

Researchers have shown the script to be gendered and strongly linked to the way in which farm labor is organized (Gasson 1973; Pilgeram and Amos 2015; Whatmore 1991). As Villa (1999:333) recognizes, “to be the oldest boy in a farm family made it natural and not questioned to take over the farm.” While the belief that farming is “in the blood” has been observed by numerous commentators (Gasson and Errington 1993; Silvasti 2012; Villa 1999), research shows how gendered expectations result in sons being socialized differently and subject to different expectations and pressures (particularly relating to involvement in farm work) from their younger and female siblings. For example, Cassidy and McGrath (2014), who applied the concept of cultural scripts to nonsucceeding farm children, documented how farmers’ daughters were encouraged to get an education, while sons were steered toward on-farm activities. Although Cassidy and McGrath make this distinction, they also highlight that nonsucceeding children are neither absent nor neutral figures in the succession process, reinforcing understanding of succession as a collective process. Similarly, Fischer and Burton (2014) recognized the differential treatment of farming sons in their case study of a Scottish farming family. They described how, initially identified as the successor simply because he was a boy, the son’s interest in farming was part of a purposeful and iterative identification process that “led to his (self) identification as the successor” (425).

Once a person has been identified as the successor, extensive exposure to farm work, often from an early age (Gasson and Errington 1993; Riley 2009), is understood to play a significant role in affirming the successor identification. In her work on farmers’ goals and values, Gasson (1973) recognized how—encouraged to be involved in the farm from an early age—farmers’ sons grow up to place value on intrinsic factors. Similarly, Fischer and Burton (2014) propose that practical affirmation through farm work is how successors are transformed from merely corresponding to an abstract “ideal,” that is, being the eldest son, to displaying the skills and knowledge necessary to be the successor. This concurs with Sachs’s (1973:202) observation that the potential successor “grows to his professional role so that he has almost no option but to internalize this role, i.e. to accept it as an element of his own self.” While Kuehne’s experiences (2013) illustrate the significance of differential socialization, it also highlights the importance of being able to continue the family story: “I felt that having spent all of my life on a

farm, and being saturated with the farming culture from parents and friends from an early age, as well as being the fifth generation of an unbroken line of farmers, I had little choice but to continue the farming tradition” (204). Gill (2013) notes how the importance of temporal elements in understanding farm succession has been neglected in academic discussion. Her understanding of individuals as merely “placeholders in the passage of time” (85) is useful in understanding the influence of the farm family in succession decision making. According to Gill, successors’ relationship to both past and future generations gives their actions meaning and underpins their identities. This notion is also observed by Siebert, Toogood, and Knierim (2006), who describe how the family farm does not belong to its present owner, but is owned by the wider family, including both past and future generations. Furthermore, Riley (2009) notes that this “positionality” begins early in the life course. In his research with farm youth, he observes how even as children, they actively situate themselves within the history of the farm and demonstrate a marked commitment to the past that serves as a “blueprint” for decision making (252). Despite fears about the viability of farming in Northern Ireland, Price and Conn (2012) observed a compulsion to “keep the name on the land” among potential successors. A majority of their respondents attributed their desire to keep going to a wider commitment to the next generation. Succession—specifically patrilineal succession—is regarded as a chief objective of the family farm (Gasson and Errington 1993), a product of what Villa (1999) describes as “family farm thinking,” where the collective takes precedence over the individual. Successor identification, as it is currently understood, is the antithesis of the autonomy characteristic of the life course in late modernity. This shift from a “society of duty” to a “marketplace of opportunity” raises concerns about the relevance of familial tradition and ultimately, the ability of the family farm to reproduce itself over generations.

Despite evidence of a shift toward individualization, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:5) recognize “there is no such thing as ‘the’ individualized society,” nor has it achieved blanket coverage across the whole population. They reference the demonstrable differences between urban and rural regions with regard to lifestyle and family structure, and suggest individualization is best understood as a trend, extending to different milieus at varying rates. This research focuses on the extent to which individualization has reached rural and particularly farming communities.

Villa (1999) was the first to consider the impact of the wider systemic changes (i.e., the modernization thesis) on intergenerational farm

transfer in her work with older- and younger-generation Norwegian farmers. Having recognized how rural society had become increasingly heterogeneous, Villa posited how the life courses of farmers were being challenged by the overall process of modernization. She observed how older farmers were subordinate to the family and the farm, while the younger generation was characterized by individuality and autonomy. Later, in their investigation into the upbringing of farm children, Brandth and Overrein (2013) observed how older fathers carried out parenting in line with the expectation that the children were to become farmers. In contrast, they note how the emphasis on individual choice indicative of late modernity (or what they term “transformed modernity”) demands an entirely different approach from younger farming fathers. Although Fischer and Burton (2014:425) identify this marked shift from “taken for granted expectations of duty and subordination to family farm goals towards a greater emphasis on individual freedom,” they equally contend that farming remained at least perceived as a “blood-based” occupation by successors themselves. Despite these previous research efforts, it remains pertinent to ask how, if at all, has the shift away from “family farm thinking” (Villa 1999) characteristic of late modernity impacted successor identification and succession decision making? Of course, the shift toward individualistic values is not happening in isolation. Factors such as a challenging economic climate and dissatisfaction with agricultural policy regimes combine to pose a plausible threat to “farming’s appeal” and give weight to the belief that farm children will not want to farm. However, for some commentators the notion that British farming faces a crisis in succession is empirically unsubstantiated (Chiswell and Lobley 2015; Lobley 2010; Lobley et al. 2005; Price and Conn 2012). This article attempts to bring the modernization literature into this debate.

### **Methods**

The research on which this article is based was undertaken as part of a wider project that sought to explore the linkages between intergenerational farm transfer and the need for the industry to sustainably intensify. The data discussed here are taken directly from semistructured face-to-face interviews with farmers and, where they existed, their potential successors, conducted in January–May 2013. We initially recruited a group of participants via a single local “key informant” known to the research team. In order to widen the sample, we recruited subsequent participants using a snowball sampling technique. We arranged interviews with all willing farmers contacted, regardless of succession status (i.e., whether they

had a successor or not). On farms where potential successors had been identified, we arranged follow-up interviews with potential successors. We were deliberately not prescriptive in our recruitment to allow results to reflect a range of succession issues across the whole farming community. Interviews typically took place in farmers' and potential successors' homes, but a small number were conducted at a neutral location (a café) at the behest of the participant. Potential successors were defined as someone who could potentially gain managerial control of the farm, including someone assumed to be the future successor by virtue of his or her relationship to the farmer and those actively moving toward gaining managerial control of the farm (Chiswell 2014).

In light of the long-standing cultural expectation that the eldest son would become the successor (de Hann 1994; Gasson and Errington 1993; Kuehne 2013; Silvasti 2012), as well as the scarcity of engagement with the potential successor in previous research (Chiswell 2014), we tried to interview farmers and their potential successors separately.<sup>1</sup> We hoped that separate interviews would allow both parties to talk openly and honestly about their hopes, motivations, and plans for the farm, without fear of repercussions, in a way that they might not have been able to do in a joint interview. While in his work with farming fathers and sons Riley (2009) notes the value of joint interviews in providing a space to understand the relationship between generations, we purposefully sought to individualize participants' narratives by conducting separate interviews, so that responses were not swayed by familial expectations. Anonymity and confidentiality were therefore key elements of the interview process.

We carried out interviews with 26 incumbent farmers and 19 potential successors on a total of 29 farms, all of which were subject to the thematic analysis. Reflecting the male-dominated nature of the industry and intergenerational farm transfer, of the 26 farmers interviewed, just one was female. Females were better represented in the potential successors (reasons for which will be explored below), accounting for just over a quarter (5 out of 19). Farmers were aged between 50 and 86 and potential successors were aged between 18 and 51. All but one of the potential successors were farmers' children. The remaining potential successor was the grandchild of the farmer. Interview questions were initially structured and sought to ascertain basic facts about the farm (including size and type), the participant (age, educational attainment, birth order), and the farm family more generally. Participants were then asked about their hopes for the family farm in the future.

<sup>1</sup>Although this was the intention, this was not possible on two occasions due to participants' schedules.

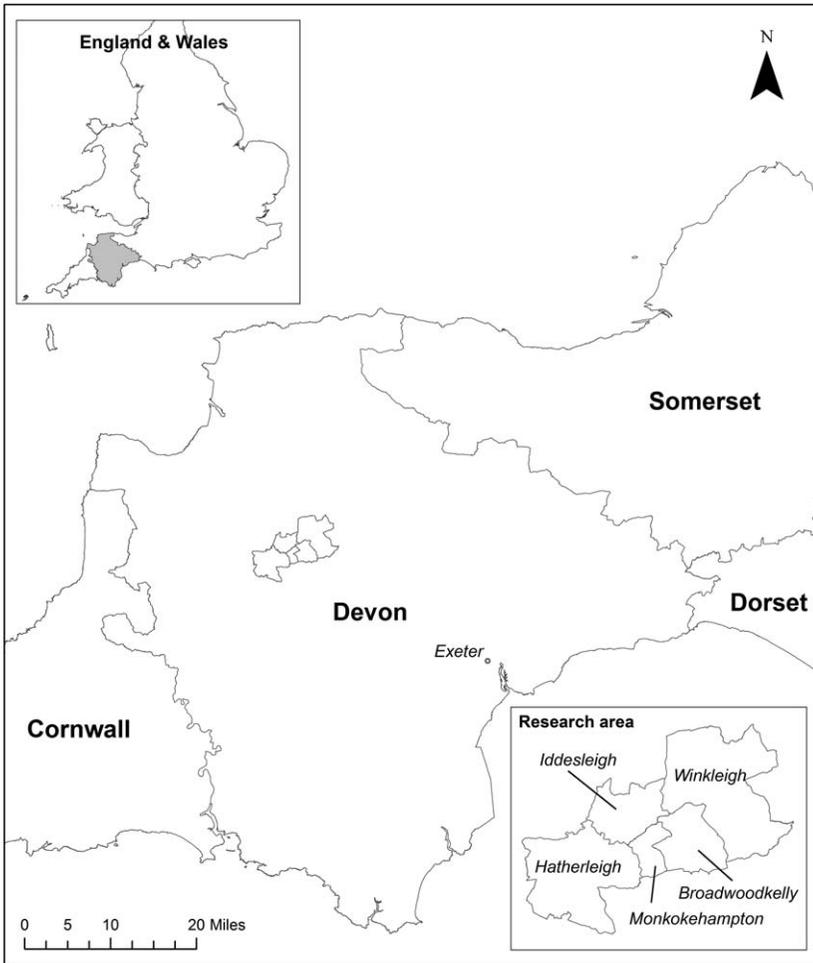


Figure 1. The research area in southwest England.

Following this, questions and topics were generally open and guided by the participants. The freedom for respondent input facilitated detailed responses, and critically, given the absence of the potential successor in previous research (Chiswell 2014), gave voice to the potential successor. As Cloke et al. (2008:151) recognize, one of many reasons for “using interviews lies in the desire ... to ‘give voice to’ others as an integral part of the research process” (see also Philo 1992).

Participating farms were located in a group of five contiguous parishes in Devon, in southwest England (Figure 1). Parishes were selected

because of the dominance of family farms in the area, and more pragmatically, because members of the research team have long associations with the area that facilitated entry via the key informant. The parishes are situated within the Culm area, an area of 1,200 square miles of distinctive landscape characterized by high rainfall, heavy intractable clay soils, and an almost complete absence of runoff as a result of little natural slope. The relatively poor land has given rise to a distinctive farming landscape, which is dominated by small family-run dairy, cattle, and beef farms.

Interview recordings were initially transcribed into Microsoft Word, and imported into qualitative analysis software (NVivo) for thematic analysis. A single member of the research team conducted interviews and the subsequent analysis. In analyzing the data, we identified key themes from salient words, sentences, and passages. The emergent coding framework was formulated by deriving meaningful themes from the data; identified themes were strongly linked to the data themselves. We then examined the coding framework and their populations (i.e., the number of references to that specific node); individual nodes we identified were then reviewed in the context of the specific research questions, and where relevant refined, combined, or discarded to create a final list of broader themes.

In recognition of the fact that farming is not a homogenous occupation, we also offer a brief description of the farm type and the participants' age and gender, following direct quotes.

## **Results**

Interview narratives revealed two distinct groups, which will be presented in turn.

### **Born-to-Be Farmers**

Born in the 1960s and 1970s, the seven participants who were “born-to-be farmers” were older than the other potential successors interviewed. Farming remained a heritable tradition for these potential successors who struggled to explicitly articulate their reasons for wanting to farm. By virtue of their gender and birth order, they were identified as the potential successor from an early age. All of these potential successors were male, and all but one was the eldest son. Potential successors in this group saw farming as a natural requirement for them. The influence of collective structures—particularly the importance of gender roles, birth order, and the familial tradition—was clear among potential successors raised in a period before social institutions based on class,

gender, the family, and so on began to lose their authority (Beck 1994). As one participant said, “It’s just how it works, passing to the son, or the eldest son. . . . It’s what has always happened, the son works on the farm and then takes it over” (potential successor 19, late 30s, dairy farm). Duty to their predecessors formed an important source of motivation for potential successors in this cohort, but equally, a commitment to future (sometimes not yet born) generations was influential. Both were commonly cited among successors in this group. Gill terms this connection to both past and future family members “temporality,” which imposes on the individual’s sense of self and gives a set of rules by which to live. “It’s what’s meant to happen,” said one interviewee, “it being passed through the family. . . . Each generation works hard for the next I suppose. . . . You just want to keep it going” (potential successor 4, early 40s, mixed farm). While the limits imposed on these potential successors during socialization rendered them unable to choose anything but farming (raising a number of questions about the degree of “choice” they had), the subtlety of this subordination meant they at least felt they were actively choosing to farm. “I don’t think my Dad ever said to me, ‘you will take over the farm,’” said one laughing, “but I knew he’d have wanted me to, and as I said, I’d grown up not really knowing anything else” (potential successor 4, early 40s, mixed farm). It was only after justifying their interest in the context of their family history and upbringing that more intrinsic motivations emerged. However, references were nominal in comparison to the significance of wider-familial and temporal narratives—a testament to their strength. Even when intrinsic motivations were taken into consideration, older potential successors’ decision making remained largely insular, and there was no evidence to suggest it was affected by external factors or conditions. One commented, “Even if farming was going to die a death tomorrow, I’d still be here, doing what I do, because as I’ve said, it’s what I was meant to do” (potential successor 5, early 50s, beef and sheep farm).

### **Qualitative Evaluators**

In contrast, a second, younger cohort of potential successors emerged. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, potential successors in this cohort were notably younger than “born-to-be farmers.” Subsequently, and in line with the wider societal shift from a “society of duty” to a “marketplace of opportunity,” they described a distinctive upbringing that, in contrast to their older counterparts’ experiences, foregrounded the individual. “Dad encouraged us to go away,” said one of these participants, “go

traveling first, see other places, see other things, before we decided . . . but yeah it was always an option but it wasn't a given, it was a process during which I came to the decision" (potential successor 23, male, mid-20s, dairy farm with some beef). Unlike their older counterparts, the younger cohort was not exclusively male, with 5 of the 12 potential successors being farmers' daughters. As an older potential successor attested, in comparison to his strictly gendered experiences, things were "different now": "It was just me and my two sisters. [And none of them expressed an interest in farming?] No. [Why do you think that was the case?] Whether they just expected that's what would happen. . . . That's different now, girls are more interested now" (potential successor 24, male, late 40s, sheep and beef farm). Unimpeded by "farm and family thinking" (Brandth and Overrein 2013) all but one of the potential successors in this group had taken or are currently taking a short-term diversion, involving a period of time away from farming, before making any long-term commitment to the family farm and the industry. The diversion typically involved further or higher education (often unrelated to agriculture), undertaking short- to medium-term nonagricultural jobs or a period of foreign travel. Farmer 2 recognized how following these experiences, potential successors have had their horizons broadened, giving them other lifestyles and occupations to measure their own lives against, something their older counterparts (as well as generations before them) typically lacked: "I think it's just a different world anyway, I think expectations are so much different as well. . . . When I left school, your expectations were different, or less I suppose, than what a lot of teenagers are now" (farmer 2, male, late 50s, beef and sheep farm). As a result, for potential successors in this cohort, farming had to allow them to satisfy certain conditions—conditions linked to or situated within the context of these wider life experiences. "Because I've got my degree I'd like to make use of it," said one, "but I've sort of got my options open. . . . I enjoy it. . . . It's not really a job really. . . . I've had office jobs in the past, working inside and they seemed to drag" (potential successor 2, male, late 20s, beef and sheep farm).

Central to this evaluative process were intrinsic motivations, such as enjoyment of working with animals or a desire to work outside. Although intrinsic motivations such as working outdoors or enjoying work tasks have long been observed as influential in the farming literature, as Gasson (1973:531) identifies, this has traditionally been the *product* of the successors' environment—"growing up in the expectation that [they] will follow in [their] father's footsteps" causing them to "unconsciously absorb values appropriate to this calling." In the absence of familial expectation, younger potential successors' intrinsic

motivations are far more prominent than they were among the older cohort:

I like being outside, I like the fact that every day you are making a difference to the livestock you look after and that matters. (potential successor 20, female, early 20s, beef and sheep farm)

I just enjoy doing it, like being out in the countryside, working with the livestock . . . and mostly driving the tractors. (potential successor 12, male, early 20s, beef and sheep farm)

In contrast to the long-term and iterative process described by “born-to-be farmers,” younger potential successors were undertaking a calculative approach to career decisions, during which farming was subject to the same scrutiny as other nonagricultural opportunities. While it is important to recognize that the younger cohort was placing a greater emphasis on fulfilling certain criteria and was carrying out a rational evaluation of farming compared to the older cohort, many also expressed the importance of family and tradition. “It’s not a reason for me to do it as such,” said one potential successor. “It’s not *the* reason. But it’s quite nice to carry it on, you have a lot of pride in what you do then, I mean it’s more than earning a living, it’s about your family . . . although you do have to make a living” (potential successor 13, male, late teens, beef and sheep farm). It would seem from younger potential successors’ narratives that evaluation is now commonplace. No longer are a successor’s values formed in response to the unconsciously absorbed expectation that he will follow in his<sup>2</sup> father’s footsteps. This shift toward evaluation is illustrated in the following vignette, which summarizes this emergent approach to decision making. The approach is more rational and all encompassing and, critically, reveals the role of the perceived prospects of the sector in securing the potential successor interest in agriculture:

I did my A-Levels, worked for a bit. . . I’m still very optimistic in terms of what I do, I like doing what I do, but I don’t know if it’s the future, if that makes sense, just ‘cause there’s so many other opportunities out there. . . . It’s not an easy life. . . . I believe farming is in a really good position with the growing population, everything tells you it’s gonna pick up, something good is going to happen in farming. (potential successor 20, female, early 20s, beef and sheep farm)

<sup>2</sup>Most likely “he” in this context.

While the increasing propensity to evaluate farming as a career option may amplify concern for the ability of the family farm to reproduce itself, the reemergence of food security on both the national and international political agendas (reflected above in comments regarding population growth) appeared to have an ameliorating effect on interest levels among this age group. A notable degree of positivity stemmed from the idea that increasing demand for food and other goods will “get farmers producing again” and subsequently alleviate restrictions on production. The anticipated resurgence of what potential successors often described as “proper farming,” attributable to the widely propagated increases in demand for food, appeared to make succession a more desirable aspiration among this cohort. “It will get farmers producing again,” said one, “which would be really good . . . But also I expect, well I hope it’ll open a lot more of the red tape . . . without stopping producing” (potential successor 23, male, mid-20s, dairy farm with some beef). This overarching improvement in public feeling toward the industry was also having a tangible impact on the experiences and interactions of individual potential successors:

When I was at school, people, other students would always be like they’re “the janner kids.” . . . Like that would be the thing. . . . Now, no one actually cares. . . . You just get . . . people just understand that’s what we do. (potential successor 8b, female, early 20s, dairy farm)

Yeah, I’d definitely be proud to say I was a farmer. . . . If you are out and people ask, “what do you do?” and we are like “we are farmers” and . . . yeah I’m proud to say it. (potential successor 17, female, early 20s, mixed farm)

Closely intertwined with this was the feeling that, in view of the renewed appreciation of food and farming described, farming was now an increasingly legitimate career opportunity and no longer a “last resort”:

Young people are seeing farming as a proper career choice. (potential successor 17, female, early 20s, mixed farm)

People used to stereotype farmers as being you know, like they can’t hardly talk . . . but people are beginning to appreciate they are a lot more knowledgeable. (potential successor 20, female, early 20s, beef and sheep farm)

It is plausible that this cohort's enthusiasm toward the improved public perception and potential of the industry was simply a product of youthful exuberance. However, older, "born-to-be farmers" demonstrated comparable enthusiasm toward the industry's stance, but instead, the nature of their upbringing meant external conditions were, and will continue to be, of little relevance to their relationship with farming. "I'd have come back to the farm regardless," one said. "It's personal, it's in your soul. Even if farming was going to die a death tomorrow, I'd still be here, because it's what I was meant to do" (potential successor 5, early 50s, beef and sheep farm).

### **Discussion**

Our research question informing this article asked how is wider societal change impacting intergenerational farm transfer and successor identification? In response to this, first, the analysis—specifically of the emergence of the younger cohort—strongly affirms that late modernization *is* impacting intergenerational transfer in the case study context. Despite a clear shift toward individualization across many societies, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002:5) warn that individualization is unlikely to have spread evenly across society, citing the demonstrable differences between its effects in urban and rural areas. The results—which show the patent impact of modernization among the case study community—suggest, in contrast to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's observations in 2002, that the effects are extending to rural populations in this case.

Born in the 1960s and 1970s—before the dissolution of social institutions intensified—"born-to-be farmers" described an upbringing predicated on communal meanings and ascribed roles, and it was clear from their narratives that the family as a whole took precedence over the individual. Their experiences corroborate dominant understandings of successor creation (Gasson and Errington 1993; Silvasti 2003; Villa 1999) and reiterate understanding of succession as a strongly gendered, cultural requirement. The use of cultural scripts (Silvasti 2003) as an "organizing force" also remains valuable in this context, shown through the limits imposed on these potential successors during socialization and their feelings of duty to continue the family story. As per Fischer and Burton (2014:434), prospective successors in this group were subject to a "multiple and ongoing identification process," during which they began to identify themselves as the successor. The experiences of "born-to-be farmers" depict the emphasis on collective behaviors and the relevance of the family in decision making. Although their

narratives raise a number of questions about the degree of “choice” they had in identifying themselves as the successor, they equally point to a strong commitment to the reproduction of the family farm.

Until this point the analysis corroborates previous understanding of successor identification, but the analysis of younger potential successors’ experiences, that is, those born in the 1980s and 1990s, reveals a dramatic shift in successor identification as it has been previously understood. In particular, the analysis highlights the distinct upbringing younger prospective successors experienced: one that foregrounded the individual and, in comparison to their older counterparts, was less influenced by familial tradition and expectation. A key outcome of this shift is the declining importance of gender in succession aspirations. Despite a strong tradition of patrilineal succession, young women interviewed were confident in their plans to eventually succeed to the farm. However, the influence of modernization is subtle in this context. While we observe how gender may no longer define young women’s intentions and aspirations in the way it once did, further research is needed to explore the influence of modernization on women’s *achievement* of those aspirations and their *experiences* of doing so. As Pilgeram and Amos (2015:36) warn, despite an increasing presence of women in farming, we “must be cautious of creating narratives that suggest women’s land access is necessarily a progressive narrative,” that is, just because more women are identifying themselves as the potential successor, it does not mean gender does not continue to shape their experiences of farming. The changes observed here highlight the need for future research into the challenges these (and other) women face having identified themselves as the potential successor in late modernity.

There is scope here for longitudinal research to understand the comparative experiences of female successors as farmers in late modernity, that is, are the experiences of these female farmers the same as male farmers? The role of gender in intergenerational farm transfer is complex and deep-seated; thus, the impact of modernization on it is unlikely to be universal, or even. More widely, the traditional family farm and its rigid gender expectations has been disparaged for its incompatibility with the openness to change required for sustainable agriculture (Peter et al. 2000; Sumner and Llewelyn 2011; Trauger et al. 2008). Do the hints of change documented here suggest the family farm is becoming better placed to respond to the subtleties of sustainable agriculture?

The freedom described by younger prospective successors resonates with Beck’s individualization thesis and contradicts enduring

understanding of prospective successors as having little conscious choice in becoming farmers (Gasson and Errington 1993). Building on the work of Errington (1998, 2002)—who identified the “diversion route” and “direct route” into farming—our analysis has introduced the concept of “short-term diversions,” defined as a period of time away from farming to experience different things (e.g., nonagricultural employment). A product of the emphasis on the individual in late modern society, short-term diversions are an important mechanism in prospective successors’ decision making and have transformed successor identification from an “abbreviated decision-making process” (Kuehne 2013) to a “qualitative evaluation,” to borrow Villa’s (1999) terminology. Similarly, Riley (2009) identified how even younger farm children were able to confidently reject tradition in order to achieve a “modern life.” We would argue that this evidence suggests the script of continuity—as it was once understood—is no longer the most important organizing force in the family farm. The prominence of intrinsic motivations among younger potential successors’ narratives is testament to this. No longer is it the case that no conscious career choice is made. In 2003, Silvasti described the family farm as an “ideological battlefield” where the traditional script was in the process of being written “afresh” to reflect new content and practices. But if we understand a cultural script as “a culturally shared expression, story or common line of argument, or an expected unfolding of events, that is deemed to be appropriate or to be expected” (Vanclay and Enticott 2011:260; see above), we would now argue that the concept of the cultural scripts holds diminishing relevance among the younger cohort.

The persistence of tradition despite a clear shift toward individualism was a key finding of this research. It aligns closely with Silvasti’s (2012:5) observation that, “in addition to continuous changes, modernization often also includes elements of persistency, even tradition.” While Fischer and Burton (2014) similarly highlight farm children’s ability to modify their positions within and relationships with the family farm, they simultaneously contend farming remains a heritable occupation. On the basis of the empirical data presented here, we believe successors’ experiences go beyond Fischer and Burton’s conclusions and assimilate more closely with Villa’s suggestion, that is, while the importance of familial connections and stories persist, they are now *surpassed* by more practical considerations, such as an interest in agricultural work or the standard of living the industry provides. Ultimately, although family and tradition remained important, it was only one of many factors younger potential successors had to consider.

While the changing experiences of potential successors make an important contribution to how we understand succession, the prevalence of qualitative evaluation also has significant implications for the ability of the family farm to sustain itself. To this end, we believe the family farm is now more vulnerable to unfavorable external conditions or the relative buoyancy of alternative career paths. We also anticipate that the process of evaluation, afforded by the emphasis on the individual in late modernity, makes the industry (across the economically developed world) more vulnerable to a “succession crisis.”

Although the increasing propensity to evaluate farming as a career option documented in the participants’ narratives may intensify concern for the longevity of the family farm, at the time of the research, the potentially devastating impact of price volatility, pressure of successive policy reforms, and the widely propagated decline in total income from farming (Defra 2014) appeared to be ameliorated by an emerging public and policy interest in food security (at least at the time of the interviews). Although merely rooted in the most basic contours of the food security imperative, that is, projected increases in demand for food, there was a clear sense of positivity linked to this notion, which realigns succession, which “has been strongly rooted in agriculture’s ‘productivist’ rationale” (Ward 1996:210), with its productivist roots. The influence of the “feeding the nation” motivation—as opposed to a more nuanced or multifaceted argument relating to the numerous contributions agriculture will be required to make—is likely a product of the British context, where the 2008 global food crisis prompted a sudden public and policy interest in the issue of food availability (Carruthers et al. 2013). Increasing recognition of the vulnerability of the global food system and therefore the value of farming has, according to industry leaders, such as Meurig Raymond, the then National Farmers’ Union deputy president, reinvigorated the appeal of the industry: “If you go back 10 years, it was far more sexy for people to go into the City and other professions, but there is a much bigger appetite to go into farming now. . . . [F]ood security and the need to produce more food has come to the fore” (Farmers Guardian, 2011). Although this so-called renaissance in agriculture (Whitehead et al. 2012) was having a positive influence on prospective successors’ evaluation of the industry at the time, intergenerational farm transfer is—owing to individualization—potentially vulnerable to negative externalities. In only the short time since these interviews were conducted, the context has shifted. The United Kingdom has since voted to leave the European Union, resulting in huge uncertainty for the industry. Faced with an uncertain future owing to Brexit, and with potential successors no

longer obliged to fulfil their role as the next link in the chain, could the industry struggle to retain familial successors? To reiterate Adam's analogy, farm children are no longer "painting by numbers"—or guided through life by familial expectations—but are now forced to create their own work of art. The prospect of a future without the guarantee of support payments, access to European labor, and free trade is likely to play a significant role in potential successors' evaluations of the industry.

### **Conclusion**

This article has considered the implications of modernization on the process of successor identification on family farms. In doing so, it focuses attention on next-generation farm successors who have hitherto been neglected in academic research. To conclude, the article initially reaffirms understanding of successor creation as a collective and iterative process. However, it also identifies an emergent cohort of younger potential successors, for whom succession is the outcome of genuine evaluation of farming as a career. It concludes that, within the case study area, modernization is changing the way in which farm children are identifying themselves as "the successor." This shift has begun to free the process of successor identification from its traditional shackles (relating to gender and birth order) and has prompted our reconceptualization of successor identification as an evaluative process. By understanding succession in this way we hope to have provided an up-to-date and more accurate account of succession processes, as well as highlighted the potential effectiveness of interventions that promote positive aspects of the industry. While a renewed interest in food and farming in both public and policy contexts proved to be driving decision making among younger potential successors, we anticipate the importance of the external context potentially leaves family farming systems more vulnerable to negative externalities than ever before. Given the numerically and geographically focused nature of this research, it is important to consider that the research findings cannot be universally applied to the wider farming community. However, we hope these findings prompt further consideration of the impact of modernization on succession and the dynamics of intergenerational transfer in different geographical contexts. This will allow us to understand whether individualization has achieved blanket coverage across the whole population, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) contend.

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