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Dr Hannah Chiswell and Professor Matt Lobley

A Recruitment Crisis in Agriculture? A reply to Heike Fischer and Rob J.F. Burton's *Understanding Farm Succession as Socially Constructed Endogenous Cycles*

Understanding Farm Succession as Socially Constructed Endogenous Cycles (Fischer and Burton 2014) in the last issue of Sociologia Ruarlis is a welcome contribution to the field of family farm succession research. Overall, the concept of 'socially constructed endogenous cycles' as a way of conceptualising successor creation is useful, bringing together previous understandings and offering a holistic and in-depth explanation as to why, generation after generation, the family farm is able to identify a familial successor. We also commend how Fischer and Burton capture the intricacies of the succession process in a field that has previously tended to rely on broader, quantitative methodologies (Chiswell 2014). Whilst we ultimately welcome Fischer and Burton's empirical contribution to the succession literature – a topic that, despite its importance – we continue to know surprisingly little about (Lobley and Baker 2012), we would nonetheless like to take this opportunity to focus on a number of their claims, with the intention of prompting further discussion and engagement in this important field.

Firstly, we are intrigued by the authors' claim that "European agriculture is experiencing a recruitment crisis that threatens the continuation of both family farming and associated rural communities" (p. 1) as well as their suggestion that "the certainty of continuity is declining" (p. 1) in many parts of the economically developed world. We make two points in response. First, there never was any "certainty of continuity". To give an example from England and Wales, historically most land was rented and there was no certainty of succession. As Newby and colleagues demonstrated, in the late 1800s some 85% of agricultural land in England and Wales was rented. By 1927 this had fallen to around 70%, but the dominance of owner occupation is a phenomenon of the post second world war period (Newby *et al.* 1978). It was only in 1976 that the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act introduced succession rights to tenants (these were subsequently removed for tenancies granted under the 1984 Agricultural Holdings Act). The second point relates to empirical evidence. Although Fischer and Burton cite research by Calus *et al*. (2008, p. 40), who suggest that only 41 per cent of Belgian farmers over 50 had "long-term farming prospects" in the form of a successor, arguably this does not constitute a 'recruitment crisis', particularly when the rate of successor identification is known to increase significantly with age. For example, Lobley (2010) described how 45 per cent of farmers aged 55-65 and 60 per cent of those aged 65 and over, reported having identified a successor. We wonder what other evidence they have to support this significant claim? Particularly when data, such as the international *FARMTRANSFERS* survey completed by over 15,600 farmers at 17 locations, across eleven different countries between 1991 and 2009, has *consistently* pointed instead to steady rates of succession and the ongoing persistence of the family farm across the developed world (Lobley 2010). In England, despite difficulties associated with the foot and mouth disease (FMD) outbreak in 2001/2002 and later, the uncertainty surrounding the 2003 CAP reforms, sequential work by Lobley *et al* (2002) and Lobley *et al* (2005a) found *increasing* rates of successor identification across the same six English study areas. In fact, rather than concern over the certainty of continuity declining, based on *FARMTRANSFERS* data, Lobley (2010, p. 16) asks "does the data presented here suggest that the 'closed shop' which concerned The Northfield Committee (1979) 30 years ago is today a barrier to development and innovation in the farm sector?". Although we recognise the data is geographically limited and becoming increasingly dated (Lobley 2010), quantitatively, the figures are difficult to contest. More

recently however, Price and Conn (2012) observed how, despite parental concern about the appeal of farming, linked to the challenging economic context, potential successors remained keen and enthusiastic, motivated by an unwavering desire to 'keep the name on the land'. Moreover, as the number of students registered on agriculture and related courses continues to rise (Brassley 2008; HESA 2014), it would seem that the supply of trained and qualified of labour for farming and allied industries is likely to increase.

Following on from this, and in the interest of further debate, we also pose this question to the authors (and the wider research community): *what is the optimum level of familial succession?* A certain level of failure to identify a successor is necessary, firstly, to free land up for growing farms wanting to accommodate their own identified potential successors, and secondly, to make room for new entrants, who, "bring with them a set of attitudes and skills which equip them to run dynamic farm businesses which meet the needs of contemporary demands" (Lobley 2010, p. 16). For example, in their comparison of organic and non-organic farmers, Lobley *et al.* (2005b) revealed that organic farmers were far less likely to have succeeded to their farm. Organic farmers were typically younger, more educated and involved in sales initiatives and other farm based enterprises. Notably, these 'new entrant' farmers were able to utilise a multitude of skills from previous employment, typically in sales, business and marketing, that meant they were frequently generating higher sales revenue (per hectare) than non-organic farms.

Fischer and Burton quite rightly consider the way in which "macro-level issues can affect succession outcomes in a variety of ways – framed by the particular identities and farm family and family farm realities present at the time" (p. 15). However, whilst we agree that mechanisation has, as they suggest, meant many aspects of farming are deemed 'too dangerous' for younger children, precluding them from certain areas of the farm or farm tasks, equally the introduction of farm technologies such as self-driving tractors, robotic milking machines and livestock feeders, farm management software, smartphones and associated apps, are creating new opportunities for (typically) IT-savvy farm children to be involved in the farm. Rather than reducing opportunity for practical affirmation of successor identities as Fischer and Burton fear, does it not simply change this dynamic? A change that could provide an interesting avenue for further research.

We also challenge Fischer and Burton's suggestion that a "sense of farmers' marginalisation in wider society […] talked about in terms of decreased 'community spirit', negative farmer stereotypes and the 'bad press' directed at farmers" (p. 16) is threatening succession outcomes. Whilst this discontent, associated with the effects of post-War agricultural intensification, continued to be observed in the early 2000s (Lobley *et al*. 2005a), contemporary research has documented farming's renewed standing in society in the UK (see IGD, 2009; Defra 2010; Carruthers, Winter and Evans 2013). The increasing spread of farming programmes on TV and the emergence of 'celebrity farmers' is further evidence of the changing standing of farming in contemporary society. In many ways farming is back in fashion. Furthermore, our own recent empirical work with farmers and potential successors has highlighted how public interest in farming and farmers (particularly associated with their part to play in addressing issues of food security in the growing global population) is being felt amongst the farming community and critically, is even improving the appeal of farming to the young mind. We wonder, could there be any reasons for this contrast? Is it simply a spatial and/or temporal difference in the two data sets or is there an alternative underlying explanation?

In conclusion, we commend Fischer and Burton's concept of 'socially constructed endogenous cycles' as a way of conceptualising successor creation and recognise its overall contribution to our understanding of succession and successor creation. We raise these issues with the aim of stimulating further discussion and research into family farm succession and welcome the opportunity to debate these issues further.

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