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From generation to generation: changing dimensions of intergenerational farm transfer

Abstract

The transfer of managerial control between generations on the family farm has long been understood as a critical and often problematic phase, with implications for both the individual farm business and more broadly, the sustainability of family farming systems. Drawing on empirical data from interviews with prospective successors and farmers in Devon, England, the paper provides a contemporary analysis of the transfer of managerial control on family farms. Although in line with traditional conceptualisations, findings reaffirm how many prospective successors were delegated tasks of increasing responsibility, with limited access to the higher responsibility financial management tasks, an emergent cohort of younger prospective successors enjoyed a contrasting progression towards managerial control, involving varied involvement across all aspects of farm management. With reference to late modernity and the individualisation thesis, the paper explores how unconstrained by tradition the emerging cohort described a wealth of off-farm experiences, including what the paper terms short-term diversions, which the analysis reveals have informed and shaped their progression towards managerial control. In view of these findings, the paper offers an alternative and up-to-date conceptualisation of the transfer of managerial control in the form of the succession matrix, before considering the potential applications and some avenues for future research.

Key words: intergenerational farm transfer; family farming; socialisation; transfer of managerial control

Introduction

"Twenty years hence the farm boy of today will mainly control the business of the state and nation, as it is now controlled by the farm boy of twenty-five years ago." (Henry Wallace 1897 – see Jack 2008)

Succession is understood as the transfer of managerial control, during which both physical assets and intangible assets, such as managerial skills and farm-specific knowledge are transferred between generations (Barclay *et al.* 2005). The transfer of managerial control represents a critical phase for the family farm with implications for the individual business and more broadly, the sustainability of family farming systems. Although a wealth of research has documented the effect identifying a successor can have on the farm business trajectory, identifying a successor is only the starting point, and the way in which the prospective successor is brought into the farm business has implications for their eventual ability to run it successfully. Despite the widely propagated importance of a smooth and timely transfer of managerial control to both farm family businesses (Gasson and Errington 1993, Lobley 2010, Uchiyama *et al.* 2008, Weston 1977) and family businesses more

generally (File and Prince 1996, Morris *et al.* 1997) the process has long been understood as problematic, with progression of the handover often frustrated by the reluctance of the older generation to delegate tasks appropriately. Deprived of the vital knowledge necessary to manage the farm, the unprepared successor is recognised as a palpable threat to the family farm (Gasson *et al.* 1988, Hastings 1984, Uchiyama *et al.* 2008, Weston 1977). Beyond the vitality of millions of individual farm businesses, inefficient transfer of managerial control now, is of aggregate, long-term concern, with potential implications for the family farm's ability to adapt and succeed in response to challenges of the future (Lobley 2010).

Despite the importance of intergenerational farm transfer, relatively little research has focused on the *process* of transfer itself (Errington and Lobley 2002). Where research does exist, it is based on increasingly outdated research such as the *FARMTRANSFERS* survey and has tended to rely exclusively on the incumbent farmer to understand what is (at least) a two-generation process. Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on the individual, associated with onset of late modernity (Giddens 1991; Beck 1994), has likely, but as yet unexplored, consequences for the nature of intergenerational transfer of managerial control on family farms. Informed by *both* farmer and prospective successor accounts, this paper aims to provide a contemporary analysis of the transfer of managerial control on family farms. The research questions in the context of this paper are: how is managerial control being transferred between generations? Is the transfer of managerial control as problematic as previously observed? Is the ongoing process of modernisation and the accompanying emphasis on the individual impacting on the transfer of managerial control? By way of context, the paper begins by introducing the concept of succession and explores how and why family farming is the most hereditary of occupations, before reviewing the research relating to the transfer of managerial control. Drawing directly on empirical findings, the remaining discussion explores two contrasting types of intergenerational transfer. Situated in the wider individualisation thesis, the discussion considers the reasons behind the contrasting modes of transfer, before considering the wider implications of the findings and avenues for future research.

The patterns and stages of managerial transfer: a review

Intergenerational farm transfer is a long-established tradition in many Western societies and as such "no other socioeconomic group displays such pronounced occupational heredity as

farmers" (de Haan 1994, p. 173). But how does the family farm reproduce itself? The concept of 'cultural scripts' (Silvasti 2003), 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, p. 260) is useful in answering this question. According to Silvasti (2003) the experiences of successors (as well as non-successors – see Cassidy and McGraith 2014) and choices available to them, are determined by the 'script of continuity' – the most important script governing farmers' way of life – which acts as a perpetual and acute organizing force for all members of the farm family. To ensure the farm is continued, parents are forced to allocate the role of the successor to one of their children, typically the eldest son (Silvasti 2003). Identified in view of their birth order and gender, successors are prescribed specific on-farm roles which serve to practically affirm their successor identity (Fischer and Burton 2014) and are subject to limited boundaries from an early age, whilst any children unlikely to succeed to the farm are encouraged to educate themselves, to mix with peers and to construct life outside the farm (Cassidy and McGraith 2014). Socialisation is subtle and iterative (Fischer and Burton 2014) and subsequently, as Gasson and Errington (1993, p. 91) note, family farm successors often exercise little conscious choice in becoming farmers, having "internalized the values of farming at an early age".

Following the identification of a successor, succession can wield a powerful influence on the farm business trajectory. A wealth of empirical data has evidenced existence of the 'succession effect', which describes the impact expectation of succession has on farm business development, and the 'successor effect', which refers to the impact successors themselves have on the business, as they move towards managerial control (Potter and Lobley 1996). In addition to these effects, the transfer of managerial control – specifically the way in which intangible assets such as farm-specific knowledge are transferred – also wields an influence *beyond* the point of transfer, although, as Uchiyama *et al.* (2008) identify, it has received less research effort. It is with this in mind, the paper focuses on the process of managerial transfer.

The importance of effective succession

Only having been apportioned appropriate levels of responsibility it is believed the successor will be prepared to manage all aspects of the business post-transfer (Hutson 1987). Slow or

fragmented transfer of responsibilities are thought to reduce the next generations' motivation, confidence and eventual competence (Hastings 1984). For Uchiyama *et al.* (2008, p. 45) "failure to be exposed to the vital knowledge necessary to comprehend the inner workings of the farm […] could pose a threat to the sustainability of the farm". Although a common concern amongst those in the family farming field, in the absence of longitudinal farm-specific research it is necessary to look to more general family business literature to substantiate the relationship between the development of prospective successors and post-transition business performance (see File and Prince 1996, Goldberg 1996, Morris *et al.* 1997, Osborne 1991). For example, Morris *et al.* (1997, p. 390) identified that the preparation level of successors, including factors such as, type and amount of work experience formed central factors in determining post-transition business performance on second- and third-generation family businesses. Although measures of business performance, specifically sales, profit and cash flow, are not necessarily representative of 'desirable farm performance' *per se*, the evidence from the general family business literature broadly supports a positive relationship between prospective successors' level of preparation and post-succession farm performance. Furthermore, the impact of transfer is thought to be even more pronounced in the family farming context, where the skills and knowledge required are often specific to the idiosyncrasies of each farm holding (Uchiyama *et al.* 2008).

Patterns and problems

Although literature on the intergenerational transfer of managerial control emphasises how the patterns of succession can vary (Gasson and Errington 1993, Potter and Lobley 1996, Steiger *et al.* 2012), they point to an *overall* progression of the prospective successor from technical to higher rung financial management tasks and decision making. The idea of a definitive ascension from low to high responsibility tasks, as part of the transfer process was first identified by Commins and Kelleher's (1973) in their study of Irish farmer's succession patterns. Similarly, in the UK, Hastings (1984) documented various patterns of management control transfer. By scoring prospective successors according to the extent of their responsibility for management activities, Hastings identified four main phases to the succession process, each representing an incremental increase in the input to decision making (see Table 1). In the early phase, successors were likely to be involved in day-to-day work planning, supervision of farm staff and decisions regarding the type of machinery. By

the fourth phase the level of decision-making becomes considerably enhanced, however, control over the finances typically represents the incumbent farmers' final bastion of status and control and thus the majority of farmers have to wait until their father's death or failing health before the final phase of succession occurs.

Table 1: Stages in the succession process

Informed by the findings from their self-completion farmer questionnaires, Errington and Tranter (1991) reaffirmed the Hastings' earlier model (Figure 1). Like Hastings, they identified a progressive handover of different types of decision-making authority, beginning with technical decisions, such as deciding the types of fertiliser or feed to use, and tactical decisions, such as deciding on work methods. Later, the prospective successor is given responsibility over strategic planning tasks, such as capital projects. In the latter stages of the process, the prospective successor becomes involved in financial management tasks, such as the negotiation of sales. As per Hastings observations, the final rung – the decision to pay bills – lies higher than the others and is often only relinquished upon the incumbent's incapacity.

Figure 1: The succession ladder (Source: Errington and Tranter 1991)

Completed by over 15,600 farmers (Lobley *et al.* 2010) the *FARMTRANSFERS* postal survey has made a major contribution to understanding the morphology of the succession ladder, corroborating both Hastings' and Errington and Tranter's findings across a number of international settings (see Uchiyama *et al.* 2008; Lobley *et al.* 2010; Lobley 2010). Although the empirical evidence reviewed here points to the reality of a 'ladder' of increasing responsibility, Lobley (2010) expresses his dissatisfaction with the understanding of such a pivotal process, claiming evidence is geographically and methodologically limited. Specifically, Uchiyama *et al.* (2008) call for a range of qualitative approaches that will allow for a more rigorous understanding of the process and, given the insufficient engagement with the prospective successor in previous research (Chiswell 2014a) will afford a more balanced insight.

Using the concept of endogenous succession cycles, Fischer and Burton (2014, p. 11) offer a unique and holistic understanding of the importance of being able to ascend the succession ladder, suggesting progression allows farm children opportunity to "practically reaffirm their

180 successor identities through both doing and being seen to do increasingly important tasks
181 increasingly well". Their progressive involvement in tasks increases the farmer's dependence
182 on the prospective successors and simultaneously serves to reinforce their commitment to
183 succession.
184
185 Despite the importance of a smooth and timely transfer of managerial control to the farm
186 business, both at an individual business and aggregate, industry level, the progression of the
187 prospective successor through the rungs of increasing responsibility – particularly their
188 progression through higher rung, financial tasks – is understood to be problematic (Errington
189 and Tranter 1991). Weston (1977, p. 239) cited a number of reasons for the incumbent's
190 reluctance, including "fear of his own security, fear of loss of interest in the farm and
191 purpose in life, lack of confidence in his son – or he may have had to wait himself to succeed
192 and so why shouldn't his son have to wait, and so on". Beyond monetary considerations, the
193 loss of 'psychic income' (Gasson and Errington 1993), which includes the non-financial
194 sources of enjoyment associated with being 'the farmer', such as local status, is also difficult
195 to forgo.
196
197 The reluctance of incumbent farmers to incorporate the next generation has been
198 highlighted as a particular problem in England (see Errington and Lobley 2002; Uchiyama *et*
199 *al.* 2008; Lobley 2010), where 'farmer's boy'[1] syndrome – a situation where the prospective
200 successor assumes the role of a hired worker, with little exposure to managerial activities –
201 has been observed in as many as one in five full-time prospective successors over 35 years
202 old (Uchiyama *et al.* 2008). Working *for*, rather than with his father, the farmer's boy has a
203 "potential lack of wider farming knowledge, business and managerial skills, and the
204 motivation required to drive the business forward" when the farmer eventually retires
205 (Lobley *et al.* 2010, p. 61).
206
207 Notwithstanding the farmer's boy syndrome, as suggested above, progression through the
208 higher rungs of the ladder is typically problematic. Retaining control over financial matters
209 gives the incumbent a suitable control mechanism in old age, sustaining their involvement
210 and crucially their identity as 'the farmer' (Hastings 1984). This failure to delegate is
211 pertinent given that the prospective successors' inclusion in higher level management and
212 decision making is thought to have a discernible impact on the trajectory of the farm on the
213 death or incapacity of the farmer.

Modernisation and the transfer of managerial control

In pre-modern or traditional society, the individual was a relatively insignificant actor, with decisions tending to be made at the collective level and individualist behaviour considered deviant or idiotic (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). However, industry's growing demand for an increasingly flexible and mobile workforce began to wane "fixed ties of family, neighbourhood and occupation, as well as from ties to a particular regional culture and landscape" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 31). Early modernity, beginning, according to Giddens (1991), at the start of the 17th century, signalled the start of the gradual shift from collective responsibility to individual precedence. Despite an increasing emphasis on the individual, behaviour remained largely determined and organised by collective structures, i.e. class system, gender roles and the family– a period that Giddens (1994, p. 91) understands as a "collaboration between modernity and tradition". It was the later disintegration of these structures – a product of modernisation's own dynamism – that began to distinguish this later phase of modernity apart from its earlier form. To use Gidden's (1994) terminology, these institutions as sources of guidance, were systematically disembedded (taken away) and re-embedded (replaced), by new ways of life that are no longer obligatory nor 'embedded' in tradition, "in which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck 1994, p. 13). The dissolution of these groupings inherent to late modernity means the individual's identity is no longer grounded in the safety of the family or community and the individual is forced to choose how to be and how to act (Giddens 1994).

It is important to note at this point, the different terms used to categorise this later phase of modernity (Dawson 2013). Initially, Bauman (1987) described a shift to 'post-modernity' but later acknowledged the term was 'flawed' by implying modernity was over (see Dawson 2013), and subsequently switched to the term 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000). Beck (1992; 2006) talked of both 'second modernity' and later, the 'cosmopolitan society', and similarly, Giddens has employed various terms, including both 'second' and 'high modernity' (Giddens 1990) as well as 'late modernity'. Gullestad (2004) recognised the 'many problems' with the collection of terminology used to describe (broadly) the (same) emergent social epoch and the time periods to which they apply, suggesting how, "all these theorists argue that there are profound wide-ranging constellations of changes occurring globally since

World War II" (Gullestad 2004, p. 8). In response to these difficulties, Gullestad instead refers 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 collective based institutions telling individuals what 'should be done', individuals have been forced to construct their own life (Giddens 1999). Beck (1994, p. 14) terms this shift in emphasis *individualisation*, which refers to the "disintegration of the certainties of industrial society" and the subsequent "compulsion to find and invent new certainties for oneself without them". Although individualisation is a contested concept, it is broadly agreed to refer to the way in which identity has transformed from a 'given' to a 'task' for which the individual is increasingly encouraged to take responsibility for (Dawson 2013). Despite a clear shift towards individualisation in many societies, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. 5) recognise "there is no such thing as 'the' individualized society", and that this development has not achieved blanket coverage across the whole population. Specifically, they reference the empirically demonstrable 'clear differences' between urban and rural regions with regards to lifestyle and family structure, and suggest individualisation should therefore be understood as a trend, extending to different groups, milieus and regions at different rates.

Villa (1999) was first to discuss the potential impact of the wider epochal shift on farmers' experiences of succession amongst different generations of farmers in Norway. She recognised how older generation farmers were subordinated to family and farm obligations, whilst the younger generation felt they had a number of opportunities to choose between, owing to an increasing emphasis on freedom and choice. Similarly, in their investigation into parenting practices in farm families, Brandth and Overrein (2013, p. 108) recognised how "older generation of fathers carried out fathering practices in line with the expectation that the children should become good farmers", whilst in late modern society, the greater emphasis put on individual choice required an entirely different fathering competence for agricultural fathers. Although Fischer and Burton (2014, p. 9) identify a 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 how farming remained perceived as a 'blood-based' occupation. In line with wider criticisms of individualisation which have centred on Beck's overestimation of the role of the individual in their own life

story (see Pilkington 2007; Kelly 2001), the successor in Fischer and Burton's example continued to value, and thus draw on, tradition in his decision-making.

Although, as per Fischer and Burton's (2014) findings, it is necessary to recognise that the importance of family and tradition has not entirely abated in succession considerations, the shift from the collective to the individual (Villa 1999) is increasingly forcing individuals to construct their own identities by drawing on a wider range of influences. Largely unimpeded by tradition, Chiswell (2014b) identified how, as children and young adults, prospective successors in her sample, are being encouraged to pursue a life beyond the farm, and as a result, see succession far more rationally than previous generations. Despite recognition of the impact of individualisation on the upbringing and experiences of farm children as potential successors, there has been little consideration of how, if at all, the shift away from 'family and farm thinking' (Villa 1999) characteristic of late modernity is impacting on the dynamics of intergenerational transfer of managerial control.

Research methods

The research on which this paper draws was undertaken as part of a wider project into family farm succession. The ensuing discussion utilises data from semi-structured interviews with fourteen incumbent farmers and their prospective successors, defined by Chiswell, (2014a, p. 307) as anyone "(actively) moving towards managerial control of the farm". Interviews were conducted between January-May 2013. Participants were recruited through a local 'key informant', and interviews arranged with farmers regardless of their succession status. Following the initial recruitment, further participants were enrolled from the original sample using a snowball sampling technique. In view of the difficulty many farmers face in handing over managerial control of the farm (Commins 1973; Weston 1977; Riley 2016) and in order to encourage participants, particularly prospective successors, to talk openly and honestly about their experiences without fear of familial repercussions, effort was made to conduct farmer and prospective successor interviews separately[2].

The research was conducted in a group of five contiguous parishes in Devon, South West England (Figure 2). The research parishes are located in the Culm area, a distinct landscape characterised by a combination of high rainfall, heavy clay soils and an almost complete absence of surface run-off. This combination of factors has resulted in a distinctive farming

316 landscape, dominated by pasture, and small-scale, family-run dairy, sheep and beef farms.
317 Whilst this distinct context means findings emerging from this research are not entirely
318 generalisable to the wider discussion of the transfer of managerial control, which are likely
319 to vary in different farming contexts, they nonetheless make a valuable contribution to the
320 discussion of intergenerational farm transfer.
321
322 Figure 2: Map of research parishes, Devon (Source: Chiswell, 2014b)
323
324 In response to the appeal from Uchiyama *et al.* (2008) for more qualitative approaches, a
325 range of semi-structured and open questions were utilised. Following some basic questions
326 relating to the farm (size and type) and the participant (age, educational attainment, birth
327 order), subsequent questions required participants to describe the division of
328 tasks/roles/responsibilities on the farm. The openness of the questions led to detailed and
329 diverse narratives. The interviews were conducted by the author, and typically lasted around
330 60-90 minutes.
331
332 Interview recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word, and subsequently imported into
333 NVivo for thematic analysis. Analysis began during the transcription, during which prominent
334 or recurring themes were noted. Subsequently, a series of nodes were created from salient
335 words, lines, sentences and passages. Themes were decided on according to their general
336 prevalence across the dataset and their relevance to the research questions.
337
338 **Transferring managerial control: divergent modes**
339
340 Conservative transfer of managerial control
341
342 The experiences of a number of prospective successors were consistent with the existence
343 of a ladder of increasing responsibility. In line with previous conceptualisations (Commins
344 and Kelleher 1973; Hastings 1984; Errington and Tranter 1991; Uchiyama *et al.* 2008; Lobley
345 *et al.* 2010; Lobley 2010), these prospective successors described a systematic ascension
346 through different levels of tasks.
347
348 Left school in the early 90s, 91 I think, came straight back ... just working for my
349 Dad, bit like any other workman really ... I was doing the hard work [laughs] and
350 just gradually ended up doing more and more ... I think as the years went by

> Dad trusted me more and more with various bits and pieces (Prospective Successor 18 – male, late 30s)

Despite heavy involvement in the day-to-day running of the farm, as previous work has demonstrated (Errington 2002, Gasson and Errington 1993, Lobley 2010), these prospective successors had limited or non-existent input into the financial and long-term investment decisions. The way Prospective Successor 18 concludes 'we're not there yet', confirms the rungs on the ladder are very real ends.

> There's a few things that Mum and Dad, Mum in particular, are still in charge of, like the money ... and I don't know what goes on ... so we're not there yet (Prospective Successor 18 – male, late 30s)

Prospective successors in this group were typically met by parental resistance during their ascent of the ladder. Critically, according to Fischer and Burton (2014) the ascension of the succession ladder reinforces successor identities. Where progression is met by resistance they suggest it can hinder enjoyment, confidence and ultimately the successful construction of successor identities.

> It took quite a while for Dad and me to find how it was going to work. To start with, he was here all the time, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't just do something, I couldn't just inject a ewe without telling him, and then he'd come over and he'd want to do it (Prospective Successor 5 – male, early 50s)

The reluctance of the incumbent generation was not exclusive to 'the farmer'. The reluctance of farmers' wives was also reported because of the potential threat to their own identity, reflecting both the integral role they play on the farm (Whatmore 1991) and their commitment to the family farm's survival (Price and Evans 2006). In their work with farm families in mid-Wales, Price and Evans (2006, p. 291) also observed how fears about farm survival were not just a male preserve either – something which they believe is "a reflection of their own patriarchal indoctrination and compliance" and echoes the position of farmers' wives here.

> Especially my Mother […] the farm means everything to them […] Mother still isn't happy about you [referring to his wife] going out and her coming in and looking after the children … even though she doesn't really do anything out there … she just likes to think, or to be able to tell everyone that she's still out on the farm (Prospective Successor 18 – male, late 30s)

Despite the associated difficulty, potential successors in this group had all graduated through technical, tactical and strategic tasks, and now broadly all assumed similar positions, poised ready to ascend to the final rung. However, as per previous conceptualisations, transfer of the finances represents a largely unattainable final rung for these prospective successors. As Hastings (1984) reasoned, and was true of farmers associated with this group, financial and management tasks allowed them to monitor and control the farm in old age.

> [You describe you're in the process of the handover or the transition, […] who does what on the farm?] Oh he does it all, in view of my age really, I can't do very much obviously. All the hard manual stuff […] But yesterday for example, we knew what was coming, it was time for the rams to go in with the ewes, and sheep to be moved around […] that's when I get called in to help to move around sheep and drenching. And in the summer I drive the tractor, picking up bails and that [That must be nice to have the best of both worlds and keep your hand in … do you have any input to the management or the finances?] Yes, I do *all* that at the moment you see (Farmer 5 – male, early 80s)

Prospective successors in this group were particularly sensitive to the difficulties incumbent farmers were experiencing as they progressed towards succession. Attuned to these difficulties and in order to appease the farmer, they allowed them to maintain their control over the finances. As exemplified by the following example, prospective successors are left with little desire to push the issue of succession at the expense over their parents' contentedness.

> At the moment it's Dad's doing [referring to the finances] and it keeps him involved, so I let him get on with it (Prospective Successor 3 – male, early 50s)

Prospective successors' acceptance of their parents' continued involvement and reluctance to relinquish higher level control at least in part, stems from their early (and largely unnegotiable) identification as 'the successor' and commitment to communal meanings. Born in the 1960s and 1970s, prospective successors in this group were socialised to assume their successor identity from a young age and followed a predefined path into farming because – as many of them maintained – it was what they were meant to do. Deeply immersed in both family and farm obligations and the overarching, collective goal of sustaining the farm, these 'born to be farmers' had little impetus to question the means of transfer of managerial control and in line with tradition were insentiently following the path that had been set for them by previous generations, leaving the means by which managerial control is being transferred as unquestioned.

> I think, if like me, you've grown up on a farm, you don't know any different, it's your lifestyle and you don't, and you haven't known much else so you carry on in farming (Prospective Successor 4 – male, mid 40s)

Linked closely to this commitment to the family story was a clear awareness and acceptance of the gendered nature of succession and their identification. As demonstrated in the following quote, the rigid gender discourse associated with intergenerational farm transfer was seen as necessary to ensure the farm is passed on. Acceptance of this as 'the norm' was also observed by Cassidy and McGrath (2014) in their research with non-succeeding farm children. They reported how female non-successors in their cohort were glad and proud that their male siblings would eventually succeed to the farm, even when there was little or no chance of any financial reimbursement for 'their' portion of the farm, because of the collective importance of farm continuity.

> It's just how it works, passing to the son, or the eldest son […] Well, you wanna pass it on […] It's what has always happened, the son works on the farm and then takes it over (Prospective Successors 19 – male, late 30s)

Although, overall participants' descriptions verified existence of a ladder of increasing responsibility, and generally reaffirmed the inaccessibility of the final rung of financial management tasks (as per previous literature), narratives revealed how the introduction of online financial systems was increasingly forcing farmers to delegate *some aspects* of

financial management, with implications for our understanding of how higher level aspects of managerial control are being transferred. Delegation of this activity was not through choice, but was a result of the farmer's computer illiteracy.

> [With regards to the books and the finances and the buying and the selling, is that, does that come under your responsibilities?] Most of it, yeah. Well, yeah quite a lot of it I'm still in charge of. I'm not computer literate so that's, I hand it over to them to do that business (Farmer 4 – male, late 60s)

Although at the time of the interview, prospective successor involvement was limited to a small number of online tasks, the increasing computerisation of farm management, has potential to radically reorder the rungs of the ladder and force the delegation of higher rung, finance-related tasks at earlier stages. Whilst Riley (2009) identified the importance of young children to the adoption and use of on-farm technology, there has been little consideration of how technology is impacting on adulthood and older age intergenerational relations.

Progressive transfer of managerial control

Whilst the widely recognised pattern of increasing responsibility, recognised by so many commentators was applicable in the instances outlined above, analysis also revealed a discrete group of prospective successors for whom the succession ladder was largely irrelevant. Unlike members of the conservative cohort, who ascended a clearly defined ladder of increasing responsibility, there was no such pattern for these prospective successors, who, along with their associated farmers, described varied involvement and contribution across all aspects of farm management. Rather than starting at the bottom rung of the succession ladder and ascending, prospective successors in this group appear to have been simultaneously (as opposed to sequentially), incorporated into all aspects of farm management, ranging from the more every day to the executive.

In comparison to those in the more traditional cohort, prospective successors in the emergent group were much younger. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, they described a notably different upbringing to their older counterparts, characterised instead by freedom and choice, and unimpeded by tradition – a consequence of individualisation, and indicative of the wider societal shift to late modernity reaching rural communities. The change was

marked by the way prospective successors talked about farming as a choice and were quite explicit about the way in which farming had to satisfy financial and lifestyle certain conditions.

> I think I'll stay farming in some sort […] providing I can make money out of it […] you have to be able to make a living, else it wouldn't justify the hard work ... I will want to be able to have some standard of living, I wouldn't find it hard to walk away from if I couldn't, that's the bottom line (Prospective Successor 23 – male, late 20s)

Whilst this observation has implications for our understanding of the socialisation of farm children in and of itself (which has been recognised elsewhere, see Villa 1999; Silvasti 2003; Fischer and Burton 2014), beyond this, the ensuing section focuses on how the extension and proliferation of late modernity to and within rural communities has had implications for the way in which managerial control is being transferred between the generations.

This shift assimilates with Brandth and Overrein's (2013, p. 107) suggestion that the positional family has become weakened following their observations of younger farmers, for whom tradition and status no longer played a strong role in raising their children. In his interviews with farm children (aged 7-15) Riley (2009, p. 254) observed how from a young age, children were able to employ 'micro-strategies' "in order to subvert narratives of the family farm and seek alternative and new pathways for themselves". Critically, and what is echoed amongst the progressive successors in this research, is Riley's (2009) suggestion that rather than being positioned within a rigid patrilineal system, within which intergenerational and gendered discourses remain unquestioned, farm children are able to forge their own identities and places within it. Similarly, Fischer and Burton (2014) recognised how farm children had developed the ability to accept, reject and modify ways in which they are seen and identified, although they attested how "family farm history and, associated with this, a sense of place and attachment to the farm play an important role" (p.425). It would appear the experiences of the younger prospective successors interviewed in this research go beyond the freedom observed by Riley and subsequently Fischer and Burton; rather than subtly forging their own identities as Riley describes, they were actively and confidently constructing entirely new identities, with minimal reference to their family stories (as encouraged by their parents).

Liberated from communal meanings and ascribed roles, unlike their older counterparts, all but one of these prospective successors did not automatically nor immediately return to the farm after compulsory education. Instead, the majority described varied experiences, often explicitly encouraged by their parents, including further or higher education (typically unrelated to agriculture), short- to medium-term non-agricultural work and often a prolonged period of foreign travel.

> Dad encouraged us to go away, go travelling first, see other places, see other things, before we decided … so I think it was when I came back from travelling, it was what I'd decided to do (Prospective Successor 23 – male, late 20s)

> We didn't really want the sons to come home straight on the farm, so we said either go and work for somebody else or get an education, and you know, rather than just fall into it (Farmer 23 – male, mid 40s)

By pursuing a short-term diversion before making a 'u-turn' back into farming, the threat of these prospective successors being 'tempted away' by off-farm careers has become very real. Their experiences and qualifications, afforded by this emergent foregrounding of the individual – characteristic of late modernity – have made them increasingly employable and connected beyond farming (particularly in comparison to their older counterparts, with far narrower experiences).

> I've got my degree and that, I'd like to make use of it, but I'm sort of like got my options open […] I'm just still taking it day by day really (Prospective Successor 2 – male, late 20s)

It is an awareness of what their prospective successors *could* be doing that distinguishes between the different rates of the transfer of managerial control observed. In recognition of their prospective successors' options, incumbent farmers in the sample expressed a need to privilege prospective successors to many of the aspects of running the farm business, to safeguard their long-term interest in the farm and thus, the eventual likelihood of succession. As Weston (1977) observed, a significant cause of dissatisfaction among prospective successors is their exclusion from management decisions; by remedying this,

incumbent farmers are helping maintain their interest in and commitment to the farm business. In response to his daughter's ability to 'do anything' career-wise, Farmer 20 – who by his own admission described himself as a 'modern farmer' – recounted his desire to offer her freedom on the farm.

> I'm quite a modern, what I call quite a modern farmer … but you see some of 'em, the Grandad's who's farming in his eighties, but it's no good is it? [No, it isn't, it's what we call the 'farmer's boy' problem, where the farmer is still hanging onto the reins of the farm] Yeah it's no good […] Yeah it's like anything … if I were like that, if I was like that with her, didn't give her freedom, she wouldn't be interested … and I don't think I'd expect 'er to be, you know, she's a capable girl, she could do anything, she's bright ... and you've gotta have these new ideas 'cause our industry is just moving on all the time (Farmer 20 – male, late 40s)

In response to this need, prospective successors in this group appear to have been granted input into and responsibility for some of the higher rung financial aspects of the business, such as negotiating sales, involvement in capital projects and responsibility over bills and payments, traditionally thought to occur in the latter stages of the process. For example, one of the youngest prospective successors in the cohort spoke of how she was largely in charge of dealing with sales representatives.

> I deal mostly with the reps and stuff now, so he trusts me with it (Prospective Successor 20 – female, early 20s)

> She does all of the selling now, I don't do nothing with that side of things (Farmer 20 – male, late 40s)

Although prospective successors in this group differ from their older counterparts because of their inclusion in higher level tasks, a further difference lies in the *nature* of this involvement. Rather than working *for* the farmer, prospective successors were influential and instrumental actors in terms of the management of the farm business. As Farmer 20 suggests, his prospective successor's involvement in costing has 'made a big difference' to the running of the farm, and notably, he felt he was learning from her input:

> She's very good, she's costing everything now, which opens my eyes, she, you know she can tell you herself, exactly what the lambs have made and what the cattle have averaged […] and she's quite a bright kid, she costs a lot of stuff, she's into buying a lot of the stuff that we use, she's on the farm trying to get the best deal, which makes a big difference to me (Farmer 20 – male, late 40s)

Although Farmer 23 described his struggle to delegate responsibilities to his sons, he also described how he felt he had to delegate decision making and 'change significantly', "to allow different ideas and different ambitions to come through". Although a difficult process for him, it was done to safeguard the likelihood of succession – or act to tie the farm's future to that of the successor.

> It's actually been the most difficult thing I've ever had to do, 'cause I've always done stuff for myself and just make a decision and do it basically […] but it is much more difficult, to sort of delegate to be able to go with different decisions […] I've found that the most difficult thing I've done, but having said that, I really want to make it work, but, so yes, we have, we've had to change significantly really, what we do, to try and give responsibility or to allow, to allow different ideas and different ambitions to come through (Farmer 23 – male, mid 40s)

The level of input enjoyed by these prospective successors – to use Fischer and Burton's (2014, p. 430) terminology – 'tied the farm's future to that of the successor'. As was also observed by Fischer and Burton in their case study, input into the way things are done on the farm increases prospective successors' enjoyment, whilst the incumbent farmers' coinciding willingness to commit to the prospective successors' ideas boosts their confidence, ultimately acting to reinforce their successor identity.

Prospective successors' experiences did not only impact on farmers' perceptions of their capabilities, but also – in the case of this sample – shaped farmers' perceptions and expectations of their own relationship with the farm in old age. In comparison to fathers of older prospective successors who struggled to consider retirement, a number of fathers of

the younger cohort were, in the most part, looking forward to retirement and opportunities available to them.

> If my son chooses not to farm, I won't hang around, you know, I'm in my late fifties now, so I will want a proper retirement [...] I love it here […] but I'd like […] some sort of retirement, away from the farm here (Farmer 2 – male, late 50s)

In these instances, the experiences of prospective successors have opened up the incumbent generations' eyes to and (secondarily) connected these farmers to what Brandth and Overrein (2013) term 'new arenas' beyond the farming context. For example, Farmer 2 talked of his daughter's experiences moving to a nearby city to work and remarked that having helped her during her move he has since even been able to envisage a happy retirement there.

> My daughter lives in [suburb of nearby city], right next to the park, backs onto the park there, and it's lovely, I just love it there, maybe it's because I helped her do her garden when they bought the house (Farmer 2 – male, late 50s)

The often vast experiences of prospective successors have connected farmers to these 'new arenas', fostering an openness to new experiences amongst them and allowing them to see beyond life as a farmer. If we understand a major difficulty associated with retirement is the "change in the pattern of his[3] activities, interests and time" (Commins 1973, p. 45), their exposure to alternative places and activities, via their children, has helped farmers to envisage the possible activities, interests and time available to them in retirement. The connection between farmers and these new domains, forged through the experiences of their children has fuelled a nascent desire to move towards succession/retirement. Combined with the *need* to accommodate and give responsibility to the prospective successor, as outlined above, increasing prospective successors' involvement in business tasks has become both necessary *and* in part, desirable in these cases.

Although analysis broadly indicated the existence of this older-younger dichotomy, it is worth noting the experiences of Prospective Successor 14, who, despite being one of the youngest in the cohort, following his father's sudden exit from the industry following the

654 foot and mouth disease (FMD) crisis, assumed a direct route into farming. Although, like his
655 younger counterparts, he enjoyed involvement in a range of tasks and was under pressure to
656 inherit responsibility for financial tasks from his grandfather, it stemmed from his
657 grandfather's increasing infirmness and the absence of a 'middle generation'. In this case the
658 incumbent farmer saw a second chance for succession in his grandson and has thus
659 delegated tasks and responsibilities to him, to safeguard the future of the family farm, after
660 it had previously looked so unlikely. This case provides a useful reminder of the importance
661 of the individual and individual circumstances driving succession decisions and processes,
662 and highlights the continued need to utilise qualitative methods that allow for these
663 nuances to emerge.
664
665 Whilst the experiences of prospective successors in this group do partially assimilate with
666 the idea of a 'flat' conveyance of responsibility – where there is less differentiation between
667 lower and higher rung tasks, as observed by Uchiyama and Whitehead (2012) on Japanese
668 farms – rather than a defined ascent through a consecutive list of tasks of increasing
669 responsibility, the *succession matrix* is proposed as a means of conceptualising the
670 succession experiences of this emergent progressive group within the research community
671 (Figure 3). The matrix does not rank tasks or activities according to level of responsibility, but
672 denotes how the prospective successor can enjoy different levels of responsibility for or
673 involvement in different types of tasks upon their return to the farm; involvement and
674 responsibility which increases (at different speeds) over time, in accordance with their
675 interests and experiences. For example, rather than being limited to a progression from low
676 to high responsibility tasks, as depicted in the hypothetical scenario in Figure 3, the
677 prospective successor might be largely responsible for different aspects of the farm
678 business, including financial decisions and management (traditionally considered a high-rung
679 task). The succession matrix does not replace the succession ladder which as evidenced in
680 the preceding discussion aligns closely with the experiences of the older cohort, but seeks to
681 conceptualise the emergent experiences of prospective successors – a product of their
682 upbringing and the shift from collective to individual thinking.
683
684 Figure 3: **'**The succession matrix' (based on Errington and Tranter 1991)
685
686 By pressurising the incumbent generation to sustain prospective successors' engagement
687 and opening their eyes to retirement possibilities beyond farming, short-term diversions are

688 both smoothing and accelerating the transfer of managerial control between the
689 generations and assuring the next generation is adequately prepared to manage all aspects
690 of the farm business. More broadly, by accelerating the transfer of managerial control, the
691 influence of the short-term diversion has potential to lower the average age of UK farmers,
692 abating longstanding concern surrounding the ageing farming population (see ADAS *et al.*
693 2004, Errington and Lobley 2002, Williams and Farrington 2006).
694
695 **Conclusion**
696
697 Informed by both farmer and prospective successor accounts, this paper has attempted to
698 provide a contemporary exploration of the transfer of managerial control on family farms.
699 The paper has begun to respond to a number of shortfalls in the intergenerational farm
700 transfer literature, including scant (and where existing, increasingly outdated) research into
701 the *process* of managerial control itself, insufficient engagement with the prospective
702 successor during data collection and the dominance of quantitative methodologies in the
703 field. Having engaged with both farmers and their prospective successors in semi-structured
704 interviews, analysis identified two distinct ways in which managerial control was being
705 transferred between the generations, attributing differences to the shift in emphasis from
706 discipline to expressivity characteristic of late modernity and the overarching process of
707 individualisation. Although it is important to consider these results emerge from a
708 numerically small study, these findings have important implications for our understanding of
709 the transfer of managerial control on family farms, as well as understanding of family farm
710 succession and the socialisation of farm children more generally.
711
712 In line with previous findings, the paper firstly documented the difficulty many prospective
713 successors have had in moving towards the managerial control of their respective family
714 farms, reaffirming the existence of the succession ladder. Although frustrated by the lack of
715 insight into higher rung tasks, having been indoctrinated to family farm thinking, these
716 prospective successors accepted the means of transfer and appeased farmers' desire to
717 maintain control. Although participants' narratives depicted the prospective successors'
718 ascension through a hierarchical list of tasks in line with previous conceptualisations, as has
719 been demonstrated, an increasing trend towards computer-based and online farm
720 administration is forcing this dynamic to change. Having highlighted this change, a potential
721 avenue of future research may be to understand how a further (and likely) move towards

computerisation will impact on the transfer of managerial control for this cohort. Although longitudinal work with the farming community is necessary to verify and explore the longer-term implications of the types of transfer of managerial control identified here, in line with longstanding beliefs from commentators in the farm-succession field and evidence from family business research, it has been contended that the failure of incumbent farmers to expose prospective successors to many – typically financial – aspects of farm management, provides them with insufficient experience to safeguard the running of the farm. Notwithstanding the longstanding concern over the efficiency of the transfer of managerial control, this paper makes a fresh appeal for longitudinal research to explore the implications of the means of intergenerational farm transfer, given the mounting pressure on the agricultural industry to meet the litany of demands associated with a growing global population.

In addition to the traditional cohort, a distinct group of prospective successors emerged, who were characterised by varying involvement across different farm management tasks, including a number of financial responsibilities. The succession matrix is presented as an alternative to the succession ladder in view of the emergent cohort. It is hoped to encourage both academics and practitioners in the area of farm business transfer to recognise and evaluate different (or less traditional) approaches to and means of transfer. Younger than their counterparts, prospective successors in this emergent group were not governed by family farm thinking – a freedom which this paper attributes to the wider and ongoing process of individualisation – and were instead encouraged to pursue their own interests. As a result of this freedom, they were typically granted huge freedom to pursue a range of opportunities away from the farm. Having pursued short-term diversions, analysis revealed how, in recognition of their employability and connections beyond farming, incumbent farmers have been forced to delegate responsibilities to ensure their prospective successors remain active, challenged and ultimately interested in the farm. Incorporated in various aspects of the farm business upon return, with opportunity to gain both experience and confidence, the short-term diversionary route into farming provides a good model for succession, helping safeguard efficient farming, post-handover. Whilst the emergence of this group points to the likely influence of individualisation, it is unlikely to have had a universal impact, varying in nature across different locations and as well as across different farm types. This provides an obvious avenue for future research to uncover the extent of these differences across Britain and Europe's diverse farming contexts.

Although recognising the influence of the short-term diversionary route into farming has implications for our understanding of family farm succession, beyond this it provides much to consider for policymakers, advisers and educators. Could short-term diversions become financially incentivised, or incorporated into agricultural courses? Although the resulting incorporation of younger prospective successors into tasks of varying responsibility is presumed as beneficial to the sustainability of these family farms post-succession, paradoxically the manifest influence of individualisation evidenced here also raises concerns about the transfer of family farms to future generations of farm children. Specifically, will the continued trend towards individualisation eventually outweigh the interest of future prospective successors in the farm entirely? Will these, albeit currently beneficial, wider experiences eventually undermine future prospective successors' relationship with the farm entirely? Whilst the emergence of this progressive group is welcomed amid longstanding concern, it should not overshadow the difficulties faced by the older cohort as they seek managerial control and the potential threat this is to the sustainability of the farm business. Having highlighted their experiences as potentially problematic, efforts need to be made to target advice, training and support for prospective successors in this age group, in order to ensure they are adequately prepared to maintain (or improve) the strength and competitiveness of the family farm.

Intergenerational farm transfer is of international significance and its prominence alone warrants continued research effort. Furthermore, as Henry Wallace's point adduces in the opening sentence of this paper, prospective successors are the farmers of tomorrow; given the numerous demands on the agricultural industry, it is imperative that we understand how the patterns of transfer in place now could influence the sustainability and resilience of family farming systems, as well as the ability of the industry to responding to the challenges of the future.

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791
792 **Notes**
793
794 1. '*Farmer's boy*' (rather than a gender neutral term) simply reflects Gasson and Errington's
795 (1993) terminology. Although the term 'boy' was used by Gasson and Errington to reflect
796 typical scenarios, the term can be applied to females and simply denotes successor
797 experience, which is not gender specific.
798 2. Although this was not possible on two occasions and interviews were conducted together.
799 3. Or hers.
800
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