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## 'I like it – I just don't know what to do with it.': the student-successor in Irish family farming

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# 'I like it – I just don't know what to do with it.': the student-successor in Irish family farming

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**Abstract:** This paper explores some of the issues facing Irish university students who are likely to succeed to the farm. This group must juggle responsibilities to their family and the landholding while simultaneously forging their professional careers away from the farm. Increasing numbers of Irish family farming offspring participate in third-level education and go on to pursue non-farming careers. Despite this, there is no evidence of the rate of land sale increasing, which is relatively unsurprising given the attachment of farm families to the land. This implies that most of this population have to navigate two distinctive roles: that of a farm successor; and that of a student, intending to pursue a career away from the farm. In light of the elderly demographic profile of farm holders in Ireland, the rate of inter-generational farm transfers will increase in the coming years. Therefore, it is opportune to examine some of the issues that this group confront. The data for this work is based on a series of semi-structured interviews with 13 participants from an original cohort of 30 students who took part in PhD research. The analysis establishes that this group's duality is an example of how family farming can adapt to social pressures whilst still retaining its own cultural norms by ensuring that the farm is passed onto the next generation. However, this is not without some challenges as highlighted in the work where conflicted attitudes to succession are discussed as well as how the farm is viewed, the likely nature of the interviewees' future relationship with the holding, and the dual path they have as students and heirs.

**Keywords:** *farm succession, student, dual roles, semi-structured interviews, rural*

## Introduction

Life in the farming community has always been mediated by a precarious and constant battle against inclement weather, variable harvests and disease. Any one of these, on its own or in combination, could cause instant ruin and fundamentally threaten the link between the family and the farm. Despite this, cultural norms demand the retention of

the farm within the family almost regardless of circumstances. Traditionally, this was underpinned by a strongly patriarchal, gendered division of social and labour roles that typically relied on the production of a suitable male heir to stay and manage the farm (see Shortall, this issue). This protected the family's future by ensuring the connection with the farm continued, and simultaneously, guarded its past by maintaining the tie between its lineage and the holding. However, as society has begun to modernise and farming has become more economically and culturally marginalised, this social system has started to come under serious pressure. This is reflected in the declining numbers of both male and female offspring who are willing to enter into this occupation, rising involvement in third-level education and the struggle to adapt to new conditions. Yet, at the same time, attachment to the land remains strong. The norm of the successful transmission of the farm from one generation to the next continues to exert a strong influence on the next generation of this community (Silvasti, 2003; Cassidy and McGrath, 2014). In order to deal with the challenge of maintaining this connection, adaptations have to be made not only on a wider societal level but also at the family level. One possible way to deal with this is to combine a professional career with part-time farming, which allows the individual to meet two different societal norms – that of pursuing a professional career and retaining ownership of the land within the family.

In this paper, attention is focused on a cohort of university students from a farming background who do not intend to become full-time farmers, and yet, are likely to succeed to the landholding. They face a number of challenges in fulfilling both roles. They participate in an education system and societal model that encourages young people to equate success with spatial mobility, flexibility and moving away from rural areas. Within this framework, the contrasts young people from rural backgrounds face between their background and what is portrayed as desirable in both the popular and academic mind-set, of an individualised migratory youth, is often overlooked (Looker and Naylor, 2009). The push-pull factors that emerge around gender, differentiated attachments, etc. have a major bearing on whether or not actors choose to stay in their community or migrate elsewhere (Glendinning *et al.*, 2003). It is a dilemma that potential successors who attend university must deal with as they move towards adulthood due to their intense engagement with the education process and their simultaneous, life-shaping connection to the farm.

This work highlights some of the issues facing those who might or will succeed to the farm but who also wish to pursue a professional career outside of the agricultural arena. Since a significant body of research already exists on the subject of succession norms, and particularly, the selection of potential successors (see for example, Potter and Lobley, 1996; Silvasti, 2003; Grubbström and Sooväli-Sepping, 2012), this concept is not explored in-depth here. Most people in this situation are prepared to accept the responsibility of succession and, indeed, it can be welcomed. But as this research highlights, it can also be problematic, creating challenging dilemmas, which must be adapted to and dealt with by the individuals concerned. The underpinning themes explored here are: firstly, the attitudes of potential successors to the prospect of taking over the landholding; secondly,

how the farm is framed in either emotional or business terms and the ways that their ownership might influence its management in the future; and lastly, the dual role of the student/successor. While it was not possible to predict whether the cohort would actually succeed or whether the issues this group face would grow larger or recede over time, the paper focuses on the feelings and attitudes of young people from the farming community who found themselves occupying this combined role. If engagement with education continues to rise and the prospects for full-time farmers grow bleaker, combining farming and a professional career could become an increasingly essential element of Irish family farming life.

## The Impact of University Education

Although university education is not directly focused on in this work, its influence on the life choices available to this group and its potential impact on their future relationship with the farm necessitates some examination of the literature in this field. According to the research that has been carried out on this subject, education systems are usually geared towards pushing young people away from rural areas and careers in farming towards professional urban living. For example, Dahlström (1996) pointed out that, in the case of Norway, the rural way of life is almost completely ignored by the education system. In this process, young people are presented with an aspirational lifestyle, bearing scant comparison to the world they grow up in. Furthermore, much of what is taught lacks any practical applicability for those who wish to work in primary industries such as farming. Corbett (2000) in *Learning to Leave: the Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community*, a study carried out in a rural community dependent on a primary industry (fishing) in Nova Scotia, Canada, contended that many teachers who work in rural schools are inclined to discourage a sense of local attachments among their students in favour of broadening their horizons and fulfilling their potential in larger urban settlements, which would also entail a rupture in their connection to the home place. Those who dropped out of school, or who chose not to continue with their education at post-secondary level, were regarded as failures, doomed to a life of struggle in the faltering local community (Corbett, 2000). In the local rural education discourse, Corbett argued that those who left to continue their studies elsewhere were deemed to have succeeded more than those who stayed. While this might reduce the possibility of retaining young people in rural areas, or more specifically in farming, this view has some practical merit since educational attainment has become essential for securing well-paid employment. Typically, those actors who gain few qualifications often have little option but to stay behind and find low-paid, locally-based employment (Stockdale, 2002; Shucksmith, 2004; Cleary *et al.*, 2012) and/or have no choice but to remain on the farm. However, while these studies explore the possible options available to discrete categories of youths who migrate for educational purposes and those who stay behind, they do not include those who pursue an education whilst at the same time maintaining the possibility of returning to take over the farm – a gap this paper looks to begin to address.

## The Relationship with the Home Place

Undoubtedly there are economic motivations that potential successors to the farm take into account when contemplating the possibility of taking over the landholding (Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010; Brandth and Overrein, 2013). However, it is not sufficient to take into account only 'rational' economic considerations as the underpinning factor in the decision whether to take on the farm or not. One must also focus on the emotional connections to the home place.

The farm as the 'home place' is suffused with a complexity of emotions; symbolic and personal meanings and attachments. Home is a dwelling place connected to an enduring, temporally entrenched narrative to which each individual has a reactive relationship (Ingold, 1993). However, this is not a straightforward concept as this is also framed within societal norms and constructs with, for example, research showing that the type of relationship actors have with the farm is mediated by their gender. Saugeres (2002) in a study carried out in rural France on the relationship between gender and landscape found that the male participants were keen to emphasise the point that 'farmers' rely on an emotional and passionate connection with the land only found in those who had been born into this way of life. This is intimately tied to the skills they alone are seen to possess since their work produces a unique capability to understand and coax out the full potential of the farm. Consequently, land ownership attains a position of importance beyond its status as a form of financial capital – it also becomes the medium by which a male farmer can locate himself in relation to the farm and within the local social hierarchy. Just as importantly, he is positioned within the annals and ranks of his own family in terms of both his ancestors and his descendants, conferring a certain kind of immortality on him (Burton, 2004).

Women, on the other hand, through their social positioning as helpmates and carers who are tied to the domestic world of childrearing and housework, are not considered to have a similar relationship with the surrounding physical landscape (Saugeres, 2002). The female respondents in this study typically defined the farm in relation to their husband and his activities and normally presented themselves as 'farmers' wives'. Even those women who ran their own farms often seemed to do so because of the lack of a suitable male rather than out of personal choice (Saugeres, 2002; Mulhall and Bogue, 2013). In addition to Saugeres' work in France, other research carried out, for example, in Norway by Brandth (1995), shows that concepts of masculine and feminine identity are not abstract notions but have a real impact on the lives that men and women lead in how relationships with the farm are contoured. In a Canadian study, female participants argued that they were not taught the same practical skills as their male siblings, thus reducing their scope to manage the farm (Leckie, 1996). This finding is supported by Riley's (2009) research on relationships between young people and work on the farm, which demonstrates that while young men serve a kind of apprenticeship where they are integrated into farming practices from an early age, young women do not receive the same opportunities. Nevertheless, women's attachments to the home place should not be underestimated. They also develop close bonds with the place where they grew up. This

can colour the kind of relationship they will evolve in the future with their home place (de Haan, 1994; Cassidy and McGrath, 2014).

## Farming Identities

Nevertheless, farming identities are not statically transmitted through the generations; instead, they should be understood as contingent and spatially located and as an attempt to respond and adapt to prevailing social conditions while holding onto overall norms and traditional frameworks. This can be seen from the case of Norway, where the definition of what does or does not constitute being a farmer has been more open to debate since 1974. In that year, the law changed to allow the firstborn, regardless of gender, to legally inherit the holding. This was in response to a changing societal model where women were demanding greater equality of access to opportunities and resources (Haugen, 1990; Villa, 1999). It demonstrates how specific adaptations are made with a view to preserving the overall culture whilst simultaneously adapting to external social circumstances that occur (Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010). Despite changing circumstances, one of the most vital concerns in farming is ensuring that the land is passed on from one generation to the next. In fact, in her work on cultural scripts in farming, Silvasti (2003) identified succession issues as the most significant of all norms for the family farming community. Typically, even where females have the same legal rights as males to inherit the land, the holding is almost exclusively passed on to sons (*ibid*). In most instances, a daughter is only considered as successor if a son is not available, or if the son is not in a position to take over the farm as a successor. Consequently, the importance attached to the farm becomes a vital element of the succession process, as it involves an interaction between parent and child, as well as other considerations, such as local and social attachments (Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010). Succession also acts as a mark of achievement in farming particularly for older generations of farmers, who view their ability to maintain their family's temporal continuity and bond with the land through passing the holding on to the next generation, as a major accomplishment (Brandth and Overrein, 2013). However, as Brandth and Overrein (2013) argue, while succession is of paramount importance for the older generation of farmers, it appears to be less important among their younger counterparts, with choice for their children viewed as a more vital concern.

## Influences on Succession Trends

While succession in Ireland continues to follow the norm of impartible patrilineal inheritance, in recent decades the number of young people actually entering the Irish farming profession has dropped dramatically with at present only 6% of farmers under 35 years of age (Cadogan, 2012). There are a number of factors in this decline that are worth a brief examination. Traditional farming identities were based on the notion of strong male breadwinners, a gendered division of labour and clear delineations of the future pathways of the family's offspring. Ní Laoire (2005) argues that, although the broad

contours of this model remain in place, the social and economic challenges faced by the farming community have led to significant changes. Responses to these issues include a move towards pluriactivity on the part of either or both partners and the expansion and intensification of farm activities (see for example, Kinsella *et al.*, 2000; Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Quinn, 2005). Furthermore, Ireland's economy has moved from a rural, agriculture base to one dependent on urban based employment, while simultaneously there has been a drop in farm incomes to below the national wage<sup>1</sup>. Largely because of these changes, the farming community no longer has the same defining role as the bulwark of rural society it once had and must, instead, reinvent itself as, for example, ideologically connected to environmental concerns or more overtly commercial endeavours (Ní Laoire, 2002). This new dynamic contributes to the challenges the farming community faces in attracting new entrants. Also, these issues must be faced by those who make the decision to take up farming.

According to Bjørkhaug and Wiborg (2010), another reason for the decline in the number of young people who stay on the farm is the perceived transformation of attitudes around the farm's promise of perpetuity. In previous generations, there was an element of sacrifice amongst farmers, an almost ritualistic performance of self-denial and hardship, which acted as proof of their philosophical commitment to this way of life. Now, the potential pool of farmers is viewed as more likely to take into account lifestyle choices, such as the need for free time as well as satisfactory income levels in considering whether to take on the landholding or not (Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010). In a Norwegian study, Villa (1999) found clear distinctions among three generations of respondents, which highlight the change in attitudes in agriculture. Amongst the oldest subjects, there was a deep dedication that precluded attachment to any other way of life and placed huge importance on historical continuity. In the so-called middle generation, farming was associated with personal choice and with returning to do one's duty after time spent elsewhere. Of the youngest cohort who opted to take over the farm, most were aware of the historical implications but were likely to analyse the situation in light of their own personal biography and whether the holding was financially solvent. There was a kind of double-edged dynamic at work here. Although the need for rational choices about their future was emphasised, there was still an emotional subtext concerning the desire to maintain an intact, functioning farm into the next generation (Villa, 1999).

However, while the number of young farmers has decreased, some young people still choose to take on the farm. The literature shows that the reasons why young people decide to take over the farm are a complex combination of personal, social and economic factors. Three motives advanced in one Scandinavian study for agreeing to take on the farm are the appeal of agricultural work, a wish to live in that particular location, and a yearning for the holding to be kept in the family (Andgard *et al.*, 2009). Much of the attachment to the idea of retaining the farm in the family is derived from a sense of obligation to previous generations and a wish to honour the commitment and sacrifices associated with this. Furthermore, the longer the family's history has been enmeshed



with that of the farm, the more likely they are to feel this sense of commitment and duty to preserve it (Vedeld *et al.*, 2003). Also, it has been found that this sense of belonging and the powerful sentiments bound up in the farm prevent the sale of the property even where it appears to be unviable to keep it on (Flemsæter, 2009). Since the family identity is so closely entangled with the farm, the prospect of losing the land represents more than simply a denial of access to an economically important resource but also the means of expressing who they are and their affiliation to a broader and older ideal (Ní Laoire, 2005). Nevertheless, in acknowledging the emotional power of this concept, and irrespective of the sense of individual obligation to the idea of succession, this has been shown to be weaker than it was in previous generations. Instead, the notion of choice as a fundamental right of the individual is posited as being of growing potency (Villa, 1999; Brandth and Overrein, 2013). However, as Silvasti (2003) points out, this should not be taken to mean that the handing on of the farm will soon cease or that family farming will be obliterated from the social landscape, but rather that it will be modified and adapted to meet the changing needs of modern society.

## Methods

This paper is based on research carried out with a cohort of Irish university students attending the National University of Ireland, Galway, who grew up on family farms. The data was collected by means of semi-structured research conversations in November, 2011 (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982). None of the group was taking agricultural related courses or intended to become full-time farmers; instead they studied a variety of courses in Arts, Medicine and Business. Thirty participants took part in the original study but for this particular work the focus was specifically on 13 individuals who had some possibility of inheriting the holding. Of this group, 6 were female with 5 possibly acting as the heir and 1 definite to succeed. Seven were male of which 2 were to be given the land and 5 had some chance of being given it. A proviso should be added here that changes might occur to their views in the future since they were relatively young and none had at that point been given the land, but nevertheless the conversations provided a useful picture of the issues they had to deal with around the whole issue of inheriting a farm. All the participants were aged between 18 and 33 and came from a wide range of geographical locations.



## The Possibility of Succession

For some, the deep connection with the farm was a source of pride and solace and the possibility of taking possession of the land in the future was welcomed or at the very least stoically accepted. However, the possibility of being given the land did not always sit easily with some of the group. For two males, Seamus and Brendan, who struggled with their probable movement back to and ownership of the farm, it was connected to a wellspring of frustrated helplessness. For Brendan the farm was a bittersweet concept because the weight of history and his emotional connections to it contended with a desire to build his own life, which potentially would lead him away from this background. This was partially linked to a moral obligation to parents and the landholding, which created a significant burden of duty. His conundrum was illustrated in this statement:

Do you stay or do you go kind of thing – do you make a go staying? It's [the farm] always there, it's a love-hate kind of thing I guess. Like I absolutely love it, love the land, love the place, but I couldn't see myself living there...that's the dilemma to return or not isn't it? Cos it's difficult and where I am in college, I made a choice to get as educated as I could if I go down that road it's only going to bring me further down a different road. There's always pull factors well just, just the country – the farm itself, the countryside and nature it's beautiful, I love that aspect to it. It's your land and it's passed down through three, four generations. I've seen my dad work it.

There was an element of sacrifice here – he had a potential responsibility to something bigger than himself around the farm, the land and the family; past, present and future almost regardless of the consequences to himself. At the same time, as was the case for Brendan, Seamus toyed with making decisions that led away from the farm. There was an air of desperation when he spoke about his decision to go to university because, while this detached him from the farm and gave him at least an illusion of choice, he still carried a heavy sense of responsibility towards the farm and to his family. This demonstrated the framework successors and particularly sons can get caught in; between being pushed away from the farm, and yet also being pulled back to it, regardless of the life they want to build.

There are nuances to the act and meaning of assuming ownership of the farm centring on the idea of the landholder and the farmer, which produce different kinds of engagement with it in the future. It is possible to separate the 'farmer' in the productive and cultural sense of the word, and the 'landholder' who takes it, so that the title to the farm is retained in the family, often in the hope that the next generation will be more enthusiastic about it. Throughout the narratives, particular individuals were clearly identifiable as the 'farmer' who stands out as having the most interest and passion for farming among the family's offspring. They become the natural successor because they are regarded as the most likely to keep the farm going in the future. This influences how they construct their future relationship with the farm as they are more likely to consider actively running it. These

individuals are often seen as suitable because they are ambitious and keen to modernise the farm and/or maintain the standards set by earlier generations. Despite the difficult decisions Brendan faced over his future relationship with the farm, he continued to align himself with this farmer identity in spite of its connotations. He noted:

I'm probably the one who's probably most inclined to inherit it and been around it most and worked it most. So no guarantee of that but I'd have the responsibility, I'd have the love for it.

Through these sentiments, he depicted himself as having a special relationship with the farm, whether perceived or real, that the rest of his family did not have. His inherent and unquenchable attraction towards farming was demonstrated by the use of the word 'blood' in the next quotation. This metaphorically infiltrated into his sense of who he was, as was shown in these comments:

[...] it was just in my blood and guts you know. [...] It wasn't a case of a nice part of the year or a nice part of farming. No matter what it was I just loved it, just in me blood I think. It's definitely still in my blood that's the main reason [he would be drawn towards it].

However, it is not necessarily always the case that the 'farmer' child is positioned as the successor who will have a productive relationship with the farm. In certain circumstances, such as the absence of other heirs, bounded normative limits created within the family farming discourse serve to draw 'non-farmer' heirs back to the farm. For instance, Seamus was encouraged to go to university by his parents. He wanted to build a life far removed from farming, which he had always detested. However, his revulsion was unlikely to be at the expense of his commitments to his family, partially because his father demanded that he return to take over the farm in the future. In theory, he could have refused to comply, but little solace would be gained from this, for it would mean turning his back on his duty to his family. These were some of his thoughts on the subject:

It's just that I find that I'm going to be in this farm whether I like it or not, I'm going to have to be involved in farming, I won't be able to escape it.

This obligated succession was an appalling prospect for him as he felt that, in the long-term, he was obliged to return to the farm regardless of whether or not he had built a successful life elsewhere. Despite his dislike of the farming lifestyle, he could not seem to contemplate anything other than farming the land, for example, the option of leasing it out. Rather than shaping his adulthood with his own choices and decisions, it was his family's wishes and cultural norms in farming, which had the power to influence him. Even if he did not choose to take over the farm, one wonders would it be a pyrrhic victory

because he would still carry his background with him – including a nagging guilt at having gone against his duty. Individuals like this must grapple with the fact that in the immediate future they are free to experiment and be spatially mobile. Yet, ultimately, they must return to the farm.

Although female participants who were likely to be given the farm, also wrestled with the question of incorporating the farm into their adult lives, they did not seem to visualise their future relationship with it in the same way as their male counterparts. In their interviews, they were more likely to position themselves as the 'landholder' rather than the 'farmer'. In these situations, there was a separation between the idea of actively running the farm and owning the land. This was largely linked to their role as relatively detached helpers growing up. However, two individuals who had worked extensively on the farm in their childhoods also expressed these views, which would appear to suggest a gendered aspect to this division. Here the concern was to retain the farm within the family rather than to develop an intensive working relationship with it. In one case, a participant, Rita, stated that she would consider renting the farm out or giving part of it to relatives for housing sites. Another woman, Aisling, contemplated developing a non-agricultural business on the farm that would facilitate its retention whilst giving space for her professional ambitions to be realised. From this, it appeared as if, for female successors there was more choice and flexibility attached to being given the land and that women were not necessarily expected to assume the mantle of the productive 'farmer' in the same way as their male counterparts.

It should be noted that not all actors who could take over the farm appeared likely to choose to do so. Andrew, for example, had the opportunity to take on the role of the 'farmer', but had moved away from this to the point that he contemplated selling any share of the holding he might receive. Although he worked on the farm a lot when he was younger, and continued to do so when he returned home at weekends, he did not wish to become either a 'farmer' or a 'landholder'. He would have liked to discard his attachments to the home place, which were always lurking at the back of his mind. They seemed to encroach on his ability to expand his horizons and move beyond the boundaries imposed by his cultural and familial background. On a kind of detached personal level, he professed himself to be satisfied with his decision to leave farming and was confident that he would be able to retreat from it. On the other hand, when Andrew considered his position from *within* the framework of his family continuum, both past and present and his upbringing, a more challenging dynamic was revealed. This appeared to be a difficult issue for him to deal with as highlighted by, for instance, his attempts to avoid taking on a deeper guilt by refusing to delve into the history of the people who used to live in the old buildings dotted around the farmyard. Yet, like the rest of his experiences on the farm, they still lingered on the edge of his consciousness, helping to anchor him to the home place. Nevertheless, he had shifted beyond the idea of needing to keep the farm out of a sense of duty or obligation but still, as noted in the next section, continued to struggle with the idea of selling any portion of the farm he might inherit.

## How the Farm is Framed

Emerging from this research, a central issue was: How the farm is framed. For potential successors, a clash between a business and emotional orientation could impact on how they viewed the farm. Potential successors usually tried to assess it in terms of a combination of both of these aspects but this was a difficult balance to achieve. One participant, George, said he appraised the farm in terms of its financial capacities. He noted that his father looked at it more from a custodial stance; not necessarily in environmental terms, but in the context of a continued family relationship with it. Nevertheless, this seemingly unsentimental attitude was tempered by George's awareness of the intergenerational relationship between his family and the farm and his reluctance to countenance selling the farm because of the work that had been put into it. George felt that his attitude would change when he formally owned the farm, as at that point, how he conceptualises it will change from cool-headed and business-like to a sense of responsibility for the continued temporal and emotional relationship between his family and the landholding. However, while the symbolic side of the farm was of concern, for these actors, there was a competing need to ensure that the farm was financially viable. This could cause conflict, particularly where the holding was small and in need of major investment, which for some gave rise to a serious dilemma about what to do with the farm in the future.

Even those who viewed the farm through a business lens, found it difficult to fully imagine it in this way without taking into account its emotive implications. When its meaning for the family and its history were considered, it became more difficult to (re) imagine it as a saleable asset that could, for example, fund a life elsewhere or be sold if it was not proving to be profitable. Were the farm to be viewed as an asset, by implication the holding was transformed into something of monetary value capable of being bought and sold. In fact, very few framed the holding as an asset and when they did so, there appeared to be an air of guilt tinging this view. If George were to succeed, he would view getting the land as a gift and would never contemplate selling it. In agreeing to succeed to the farm, a guardianship role of the farm with an attendant duty to maintain and improve it for the next generation, is taken on, thus to some extent undermining the idea of the farm as purely being a business focused concept. Equally for someone like Andrew, who did not wish to become a farmer, the land still had a hold on him that made it difficult for him to contemplate its status as an asset to be sold. At one point, he mused about selling his share of the holding in the future in order to make some money but, then, quickly backtracked on this idea:

I was thinking right sell it, make a few bob [money] but where there is such an attachment to it now. There's so much work have [sic] gone into it over the years too that it's just a kind of shame to kind of kick it out back and be done with it.

The framing of the farm was further complicated by the role it played as the 'home place', which was a powerful emotional lodestone that attracted even those who did not identify themselves as the 'farmer'. Aisling, who was likely to be given the farm, captured her

mood towards home when she said that when she thought of it, she imagined being in her grandmother's kitchen and being asked to let out the hens and her father coming in for breakfast after milking the cows. From this can be seen the indivisibility of the practical/economic life of the farm from her perceptions of the symbolic meaning of home and family. While she had begun to build a professional life that led away from the farm, at the same time this deep relationship with the farm made it difficult for her to contemplate losing the land. The farm acted as a repository for memories and offered a perceptible link back to her own past and the broader familial one. If the farm were to be sold then individuals like her would relinquish access to these memories, betraying a vital part of the self and their childhoods. As the probable future owner of the farm, she regarded herself as the guardian of these memories, which preserved her own past and the echo of the deceased. She sought to reconcile being pulled away from the farm, in part because of her career aspirations and her reluctance to live in the local community, with a profound urge to hold on to it:

I just have so many memories of it [the farm] – my dad – you know it's been in our family for like generations and I wouldn't like to be I'd like to keep it that way. I like being able to go home too you know. The outdoors and I suppose all the memories of growing up there, and yeah I like it I just don't know what to do with it.

While the farm's destiny might not have had an impact on her immediate path towards adulthood, it could have a strong influence on her in later years if she takes formal ownership of it. In her view, this quandary hung over her like a Sword of Damocles and gnawingly shadowed her future. This pull also extended to actors' relationships with the physical space of the landholding as when Seamus, despite his hatred of many aspects of farming life, spoke effusively of the natural beauty of his home place and its meaning for him:

It is beautiful, like when I say what is beautiful like the nature there that is why I love home. We live on a pier; next field is horses so I love it. I sit out there; I used to sit out there a lot only recently – looking at it you know I'd be at peace.

## Conflicting Dual Role

While education was clearly to the forefront of their life experience to date, those who were identified as potential successors often took on a dual role within the family, incorporating significant workloads on the farm and a focus on attainment in school. Although this was undoubtedly challenging, this emphasis on both facets gave space for different possible paths to be followed as the young person could blend farming and a professional career if they so wished to in the future. This dual path is especially vital on very small landholdings, which face bleak financial and social futures but that

nevertheless might still be expected to be held onto by the next generation. There is something of a contradiction in parents creating work-based attachments revolving around a potential induction into the role and label of the 'farmer', whilst simultaneously pushing their children away from it. This conflict was demonstrated by how, for instance, George's father encouraged him to pursue third-level education but, nevertheless, was a little dismayed at how this had put him on a path, which might lead him permanently away from the farm. While he was steered away from viewing farming as a full-time job in the future through his father's praise of his mother's steady employment, George was still conditioned into the role of the 'farmer' with its attendant underlying obligations to take charge of the farm. His socialisation into this dual position showed the aspirations his mother and father had for him, but, at the same time, these must accommodate the normative goal of retaining the farm in the family.

It should be noted that, in a few cases, while the individual was expected to play a significant part in the working life of the farm as they grew up, their parents did not encourage them to see this as a long-term life strategy. Their parents seemed to hope that by engaging with education, farming could recede into the background and other lifestyles and careers would take complete precedence. In these situations, there appeared to be an active desire on the part of their parents that their children would not take on the farm. For example, one participant, Myles, recalled a conversation, which took place with his father where he raised the possibility of taking over the farm in the future. In response, his father gave a derisive answer and instead strongly encouraged him to take full advantage of his university education and appeared to be determined that his son would avoid following this path. There is some conflict here, however, since Myles had been brought up to firmly identify as a 'farmer' on both a practical and cultural basis and yet he was being pushed away from the farm, which makes the future of the farm quite uncertain. For others, even though they appeared to be the likely successors in terms of personal characteristics, they were not pressurised by their families to engage with the farms immediately. Rather, there was an expectation that they would combine education and farming in the longer term. However, in general this dual role did cause issues for how young people thought about both their professional and farm-based futures.

## Conclusion

In some cases, maintaining the relationship between the family and the holding hinged on preserving the farm in its essence rather than in its concrete physical appearance or specific farming practices, i.e., where a 'landholder' might retain the title to the farm but then create an alternative enterprise on site or lease it out. For others, however, this was not an option that was contemplated. Instead, they fell into the category of the 'farmer' who fitted within the successor category. It was difficult to say with absolute certainty whether this divide was gendered. However, it would seem that there was a presumption that male participants who were likely to be entrusted with the farm would maintain it as a working entity in large part because of their identification as the 'farmer' in the family

or simply because of cultural expectations around this. For females, succession was linked to the idea of keeping the farm in the family in the hope that the next generation would have greater enthusiasm for the role of farmer. While these roles potentially carried very different long-term consequences in how actively involved they are expected to be on a day-to-day basis, significant issues arose across the group in terms of their ownership of the holding, its conceptualisation against a business or emotional backdrop and the duality of their roles within education and farming.

Furthermore, within the family farming discourse, there is a certain air of immutability associated with how it is framed and viewed-as if it has remained unchanged over the decades. However, this fails to take into account the numerous ways it has evolved over time to meet shifting circumstances and unexpected challenges. Perhaps in this way, the idea of tradition in family farming needs to be reimagined as a framework rather than a fixed set of precepts since this reflects a willingness to adapt to the socio-cultural milieu it is grounded in. In the case of the individuals who were discussed in this work, this involved attending university with the likelihood of following a professional career path *and* taking ownership of the farm. This leads away from the discrete idea of the family's offspring dividing into those who migrate or those who stay on the farm with no movement between the two as seems to be suggested in the literature. Farming norms are not static concepts, but instead, are flexible, albeit within a particular set of choices, which allows young people to build a viable identity capable of competing and flourishing in society. A certain level of elasticity is still permitted in how a family adapts a strategy, to not only build the future of the family's offspring, but also, where possible, to safeguard the farm's survival through the socialisation of a potential successor. In this way both the continuation of the farm and the future of its children might be safeguarded.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The average Irish farm income in 2014 was €24,000. The average annual industrial earnings for the same period were over €35,000 (Irish Farmers' Association, 2015).



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