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Exploring the socio-cultural contexts of fishers and fishing: Developing the concept of the ‘good fisher’



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ABSTRACT

Recent calls have been made to pay greater attention to the social and cultural contexts of fisheries and their management. This paper explores how the recent Bourdieusian-inspired literature on the ‘good farmer’ might inform our discussion of fishers and their activities. Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus, field and capital(s), and how these interact in (re)shaping the positioning as a ‘good fisher’, allows us to move beyond the myopic, economic, framing of fishers seen in much previous literature and fishing policy. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations in a small-scale fishing community in North Wales (UK), the paper explores the particularity of the fishing field, and notes the multiple performances and demonstrations required in order for individuals to position as a ‘good fisher’. It goes on to highlight the importance of these performances in developing social capital and the associated access to networks of support and reciprocity at sea. Central to these interrelations, the paper observes, is adhering to and internalising various ‘rules of the game’ – which include managing territories, respecting fishing gear, maintaining safety at sea, and the importance of keeping secrets. The paper moves on to consider the implications of these observations for the current and future management of fishing in such areas – noting how pre-existing and context-specific relations between fishers offer boundaries to what change might be achieved by new policies – before examining future agendas for research in this field.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a call for a greater application of insights from social science to the discussion of fishing and the fishing industry. As [Urquhart et al. \(2011, p.420\)](#) suggest: “while much is known about the ecological and economic aspects of fisheries, the social and cultural impacts of fisheries and their management has been under-researched and is often overlooked in policy”. Such a call has been set against the backdrop of a turbulent recent history for the fishing industry stemming from concerns for fish stock resulting from over-fishing ([Costello et al., 2012](#)), the economic decline of the ‘fishing industry’ and what the attendant ‘post-productive’ coastal settings might look like ([Salmi, 2015](#)), as well as the subsequent calls to safeguard this industry ([DEFRA, 2007](#)). As [Sønvisen \(2014, p.194\)](#) has recently argued in the pages

of this journal, a particular weakness of much pre-existing fisheries research has been the tendency to depict fishers¹ as “myopic and short-run profit maximizers”, which arguably ignores the complexity, diversity and dynamicity in the behaviour of fishers (see also [Nightingale, 2011](#); [St Martin, 2007](#)). Although they recognise a growth in research which has sought to contradict these prevailing models, they conclude that the “operating assumption of homogeneity among fishers prevails in fisheries management systems” ([Sønvisen, 2014, p.194](#)). As several authors have noted, such assumptions – which fail to fully understand the social and cultural contexts in which fishers actually operate – are

¹ Although all of those spoken to in this research self-defined as ‘fishermen’, in this paper we use the more gender-inclusive term of ‘fisher’. [Branch and Kleiber \(2015\)](#) have recently offered a detailed discussion of how such choices of terminology may be interpreted as processes of inclusion and validation, or exclusion and disrespect depending on the context. Whilst the voices in this paper are predominantly those of men, we do not wish to foreclose the possibility that in other geographical contexts, where our findings here may have relevance, that it may be women who perform these roles and activities.

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likely to limit what can be achieved by fishing policy (Davies and Hodge, 2007).

This recognition of the need for a conceptual apparatus which moves us beyond a purely economic depiction of fishers has striking parallels to the literature on farming and agriculture. For several years now rural and agricultural social scientists have forged similar debates with several innovative approaches which have sought a consideration of farmers as more than 'rational' *homo economicus* and which takes fuller account of the social and cultural contexts which can serve to shape their activities (see Riley, 2011). Arguably there is much which might be learned, for the consideration of fishers, from this more voluminous literature on agriculture and some useful cross-fertilisation can already be noted. Boonstra and Hentati-Sundberg (2014), for example, deploy the idea of 'fishing styles' which echoes that more long-standing work on farming styles (see Van der Ploeg, 2003); Sønvisen (2014) draws on typology, or the study of types, that has been successfully applied in the discussion of agriculture (Whatmore et al., 1987); Urquhart and Acott (2013), in their discussion of occupational identity, highlight the parallels with discussions of occupational identity in times of structural change within agriculture (Brandth and Haugen, 2011); whilst earlier work on farmers environmental attitudes and perceptions of farmers to environmental schemes (e.g. Morris and Potter, 1995) has been taken forward in considering how fishers adapt (or not) to new marine policy (Gelcich et al., 2008). The following paper seeks to draw into this discussion of fishers and fishing the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu relating to habitus, capital, field and 'rules of the game'. Specifically, it seeks to forge a critical dialogue between the case of fishers and the growing body of work, drawing on Bourdieu, which might be termed the 'good farmer' literature (Burton et al., 2008; Burton, 2004; Sutherland and Burton, 2011).

Within the literature on the 'good farmer', the discussion of how a farmer's social position and status is impacted upon by their adherence "to a set of principles based on values and standards embedded in farming culture" (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012, p.232) has been a fruitful avenue of social science research and a survey of this literature highlights three key insights which it might offer the discussion of fishers. First, and foremost, this literature moves beyond a focus on economic capital to also give account to social capital (stemming from, and reaffirmed by, social contacts) and cultural capital (skills, knowledge and dispositions which may be gained by education and socialisation). In addition, attention is given to symbolic capital, which is the form that these other types of capital might take on when they are "perceived and recognised as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1989, p.17) within a particular field. Second, it recognises the importance of the surrounding community – with the farming community generally, and farming neighbours specifically, providing the conduit through which capital is built up, exchanged and policed (Sutherland and Burton, 2011). Third, this body of research has been useful in its application to the discussion of wider structural changes and changing agricultural policy. So, for example, research employing this framework has considered both how new agricultural policies – such as agri-environment schemes – may be rendered 'culturally unsustainable' (Burton et al., 2008) when in conflict with pre-existing notions of good farming, as well as the wider discussion of whether changing structural conditions may change the farming habitus and what it is to be a 'good farmer' (Riley, 2016a; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012).

Although this work on the good farmer offers clear potential, it is important to note at the outset that fundamental, as well more subtle, differences between fishing and farming need accounting for when attempting this cross-pollination of ideas. These differences stem in large part from the structures of ownership and the particular materiality of the sea. Whilst farming is clearly, and often

literally, demarcated in terms of ownership and management patterns, the sea is more complex. Historically depicted as a common resource it has become, some commentators suggest, "owned by no-one in particular but managed by the state in trust for its citizens" as access rights have been eroded via a succession of licensing, quota restrictions and rights based management (Symes and Phillipson, 2009, p.2). More fundamentally, in distinction to the fixity of farmland, the mobility and fluidity of the sea mean that it is "an active participant in the politics of its management" (Bear, 2012, p.8) providing challenges of access, visibility and management (both from an exploitation as well as conservation standpoint) – as Bear (2012, p.15) observes: "boundaries are drawn on maps to determine where certain activities may or may not take place, but the materiality of the [sea] does not necessarily respect the boundaries". Drawing on in depth qualitative research on the Llŷn peninsula in Wales (UK) the aim of the following paper is to explore how ideas from the good farmer literature can be usefully utilised and (re)shaped to the discussion of fishing and fishers. Following a consideration of current trends in the social science literature relating to fishing, the paper outlines the key tenets of the good farming literature, before examining how this relates to, and might be rethought in relation to, our specific study of fishers in the Llŷn peninsula. The paper then moves on to outline the wider relevance of these findings and suggest potential avenues for future research.

2. Conceptualising the 'good fisher'

2.1. Social science research and fishers

In surveying the past research on fisheries, it has been suggested that biological and economic perspectives have tended to dominate discourses of fisheries management (Symes and Hoefnagel, 2010; Urquhart and Acott, 2013). Although, prior to the late 1980s, there were examples, particularly from anthropology, which employed more in-depth ethnographic approaches to researching fisheries (Acheson, 1981), it has been argued that the pursuit of 'policy-relevant' research meant that more socially-orientated perspectives tended to become marginalized (Symes and Phillipson, 2009) with little attention paid to the "social organization of fishing and its importance in fisheries management contexts" (van Ginkel, 2014, p.2). Nonetheless, social science research has made an impact on the wider discussion of fishing dynamics, with one of the most voluminous contributions coming under what might be termed the 'common property resource' literature (see McCay and Acheson, 1987). Seeking to act as a corrective to Hardin's (1968) notion of the 'tragedy of the commons' – which has underpinned the aforementioned 'bio-economic' perspectives within fisheries management – this research has provided empirical evidence to suggest that fishers are able, under certain institutional conditions, to self-organise for collective good rather than just for individual benefit (McCay and Acheson, 1987; Ostrom, 1990; Pomeroy and Berkes, 1997; St Martin, 2006). Jentoft and Davis (1993), for example, add nuance to this discussion by calling for a move beyond essentialist depictions of fishers, to recognizing how different types of individualism (the 'rugged individualist' and the 'utilitarian individualist' in their study) might facilitate different forms of group engagement and cooperative behavior – but like many studies in this arena they suggest that a mediator is often required for successful cooperative action. This latter point has been taken forward in recent critiques which have argued that self-organisation and self-governance is often sporadic and unreliable in relation to contemporary sustainability policy and that attempts to govern one part of the system might lead to unintended acts of self-organisation in other parts (de la Torre-Castro

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