



# How does longer term participation in agri-environment schemes [re]shape farmers' environmental dispositions and identities?



Mark Riley

Department of Geography and Planning, 413, Roxby Building, University of Liverpool, L69 7ZT, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

There is much debate and conjecture over how participation in agri-environment schemes (AESs) (re)shapes farmers' environmental actions, understandings and associated identities. This paper develops a unique, temporally sensitive, qualitative approach of revisiting farms—which acts as a corrective to the current, speculative, understandings of how farmers' relationships with AESs change over time. The paper advances Bourdieusian-inspired ideas of the cultural construct of 'good farming' and 'knowledge cultures', bringing in the notion of hysteresis in order to develop a temporally-inflected consideration of farmers and their AES involvement. The findings reveal how, over the 10 year period, constructive interchanges have taken place between farmers and conservation officers, and stress the need, when thinking about the cultural sustainability of AESs, to recognise the multiple forms of capital that farms may produce. Conceptually, the paper reshapes the concept of the good farmer to: (1) recognise the geographically-contingent nature of the term; (2) redefine the concept away from the hitherto predominant focus on farming individuals; (3) give closer appreciation of the *multiple* forms of capital which constitute the good farmer identity (as well as how these intersect with each other); (4) and offer clearer recognition of how the good farmer ideals may evolve and be redefined over time. The paper moves on to make practical recommendations for those developing and administering AESs. Beyond the consideration of farmers, the paper has implications for wider understandings of environmental behaviours and associated identities.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades agri-environmental schemes (AESs) have become a central instrument in the attempts to deliver more sustainable countryside management. From the mid-1990s their importance has been cemented through increased spend (particularly in Europe, but also in other parts of the world) as well as an increase in the utilisable agricultural area which has been covered by agreements under such schemes (Espinosa-Goded et al., 2010; Riley, 2011). Whilst there are interesting debates opening up around the ecological (Kleijn et al., 2006) and economic benefits (Quillérou et al., 2011) of AESs, it is clear that farmers play a central role and understanding their rationale and motivations for [non]participation is crucial to the effectiveness of AESs.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on a wide range of theoretical perspectives and geographical contexts, research has highlighted a multiplicity of influences on

participation, which have included a complex mix of situational characteristics (including the farm characteristics and nature of the farm enterprise), farmer demographics, scheme factors (including competing knowledges between land managers and scheme officials) as well as wider socio-cultural contexts (for detailed reviews see Siebert et al. (2006), Riley (2011) and Burton (2014)). Recently, within this journal, Ingram et al. (2013, p. 268) have noted that a serious limitation of much of this previous research is that it has "taken a largely static approach that sees motivations and practices as a present-centred issue". The following paper moves the discussion beyond this limitation by considering how longer term participation in AESs impacts upon the environmental dispositions and identities of farmers. It does this through the novel approach of revisiting farms 10 years after initial visits to conduct in-depth farm-life history interviews to discuss AES participation and activities.

Whilst there have been speculative suggestions within existing research that "it would reasonably be expected that there would already be discernible changes in farmers' attitudes, and even farming cultures, from participation in agri-environmental schemes" (Lowe et al., 1999), there remains considerable debate

E-mail address: [mark.riley@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:mark.riley@liverpool.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> Although it is beyond the intended scope of this paper, there is a growing critique of the formal evaluations of the programmes—see for example Dwyer et al. (2008).

around whether engagement with schemes over a long period can lead to more intrinsically environmental orientations. On the one hand a few studies have tentatively implied a greater level of both environmental concern and understanding resulting from scheme participation (Fish et al., 2003; Morris, 2006), and authors such as Bager and Proost (1997, p. 91–92) speculate that: “farmers hardly remain unaffected by their practical pro-environmental efforts. The process may well start on the basis of pure calculative reasoning, but environmental priorities and concerns may over the years sneak into their minds”. On the other hand there are scholars who point to how the temporary nature of AES agreements “neither require deep personal involvement of contracted actors nor do they generally force change in farm management strategies” (de Snoo et al., 2013, p.67). Interrelated with the lack of attention paid, within previous research, to the potential dynamicity of farmer-agri-environment relations is the failure to take a more holistic approach which recognises how agri-environmental actions are set within wider agricultural practices (Sutherland, 2010) and broader social contexts. A productive area of work which has sought to better understand these wider contexts is that which has considered farming habitus and the cultural norms around ‘good farming’ practice. This literature notes the ways in which a farmer’s social position and status is impacted by their adherence “to a set of principles based on values and standards embedded in farming culture” (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012, p. 232). Burton et al. (2008) and Burton and Paragahawewa (2011) have applied this to the discussion of AESs and have suggested that certain practices of high capital value—such as high yields and farm appearance—may often be incompatible with AESs’ focus on less intensive farming practices and may thus render such schemes as ‘culturally unsustainable’. Whilst such analyses may paint a bleak picture of the likely successfulness of AESs, there is work focussing on other aspects of agriculture which has pointed to how farming practices, and farmers’ relationships to these practices, may change in light of changing economic, political and technological conditions (Haggerty et al., 2009). Although they focus on organic farming rather than AESs *per se*, recent work by Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012, p. 233), for example, suggests that symbols of good farming may be subject to change over time, but note that there have been “only casual remarks regarding the process through which old ideals are eroded and new ideals developed, or how definitions of good farming become embedded in farming culture”.

Arguably, the failure to fully comprehend and articulate the temporal dynamicity of farmers’ AES participation is, in part, an issue of research design and methodological approach employed. At one level, Morris (2004, p. 178) reflects on the timing of research with farmers, noting that too often the focus of inquiry has been on the drawing up of AES agreements and immediately post-adoption, and accordingly notes that: “greater consideration is required of the issues that arise after the decision to participate in an AES”. At a second level, the most common approach has been to focus on farmers and their environmental dispositions from one point in time—most often focussing on current ideals and attitudes and making the implicit assumption that these are either fixed, or at best one-directional.<sup>2</sup> Those taking a more consciously temporal perspective have worked from either a more retrospective approach which has considered farmer’s narratives of their past involvement in schemes and how this impacts on their current position (Riley, 2006) or, as part of a more forward looking approach, have sought to consider how AESs are

incorporated within farm development pathways (Ingram et al., 2013). The following paper seeks to advance understandings of farmers and AES participation in two ways. First, through the development of a unique, temporally sensitive, qualitative approach of revisiting farms, the paper will act as a corrective to the current, speculative, understandings of how farmers’ relationships with AESs change over time. Second, the paper will seek to critically question both the notion of the good farmer as well as its specific application to the discussion of AESs. In particular, the suggestion that, through this lens, AESs are culturally unsustainable. Through synthesising the good farmer concept with the notion(s) of knowledge cultures and Bourdieu’s notion of hysteresis, the paper will develop an alternative appreciation of farmers and AESs.

## 2. Conceptualising agri-environmental activity, change and ‘good farming’

In conceptualising farm practices and change, this paper brings together Bourdieusian ideas of habitus, capital, ‘rules of the game’ and hysteresis. Specifically, it seeks to synthesize and move forward two areas of work which have been underpinned by Bourdieusian thinking. First, is that which has looked at the construct of ‘good farming’ and the ‘good farmer’ (e.g. Stock, 2007; Burton et al., 2008; Burton, 2004; Sutherland and Burton, 2011), and second that work which has considered farming practices through focussing on what have been termed ‘knowledge cultures’ (Morris, 2006; Riley, 2008; Tsouvalis et al., 2000). Although these two tranches of work draw differently on Bourdieu, particularly in their terminology, they share several similar facets which help when considering farmers and farmland conservation.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Bourdieu’s ideas of capital, habitus and field—and the focus on “the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the habitus)” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. vii)—provides a useful framing for the discussion of farmers and conservation as they facilitate a more nuanced account of the social and cultural contexts which iteratively shape what it is to be a ‘good farmer’ (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland and Burton, 2011).

Bourdieu suggests that the (re) production of capital(s) is central to social relations and social positioning. For approaching farming in particular, these conceptual tools are useful as they move beyond a simple focus on economic capital—and the depiction of farmers as ‘rational’ *homo economicus* (Wilson, 2008, p. 369)—to also take account of social capital (emanating 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, 1986, p. 17) within a particular field. In the application of Bourdieusian ideas within agricultural studies it has been cultural capital—in its three forms of institutional, objectified and embodied—which has been most often discussed. Institutional cultural capital involves the certification of cultural competence and has been associated with institutions such as breed societies (see Yarwood and Evans, 2006) which certify and validate breed and herd qualities. Objectified cultural capital pertains to those symbols which are recognised, within particular groups such as farming, as having high cultural value and the display and ownership of which confers prestige. Examples of such objectified cultural capital identified in previous work have

<sup>2</sup> A rare exception is the longitudinal study of Macdonald and Johnson (2000) which re-questioned farmers 17 years after initial visit. Their study, however, relied on a questionnaire survey rather than an in-depth qualitative approach as taken in the current paper.

<sup>3</sup> The literature of knowledge cultures is less explicit in its use of Bourdieusian terminology—drawing also on aspects of the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) and Foucauldian ideas of knowledge-power relations (see Tsouvalis et al., 2000; Morris, 2006).

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