



Balancing family traditions and business: Gendered strategies for achieving future resilience among agricultural students



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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Agricultural students
Resilience
Generational succession
Farming
Gender

This paper emphasises the future generation of farmers, a group that has been relatively neglected in previous research. Based on focus group interviews, it highlights Swedish agricultural students' gendered strategies to create a successful farm business in the future, along with the opportunities and obstacles they foresee in generational succession and their future farming activities. The interviews are analysed within the framework of resilience theory, focussing on adaption and renewal. Students highlight the importance of balancing emotional bonds to family and traditions with business goals. It is shown that strategies of renewal are guided by social values. The solitary farmer is replaced by a networking farmer that gathers knowledge in local and international settings. The view of how a partner contributes is, on the one hand, traditional while also showing signs of gender role transformation. We argue that a functioning 'work–love balance' reinforces resilience processes in farming.

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1. Introduction

The future of European farming lies in the hands of the coming generation of young farmers. One key issue is the potential for these farmers to relate and adapt to ongoing processes of change within the agricultural sector. These changes may be external, such as regulations, or more internal, such as generational succession (Wiborg and Bjørkhaug, 2011, Parsonson-Ensor and Saunders, 2011). This study focuses on the thoughts and expectations of a group of Swedish agriculture students; about their future as farmers, generational succession, and the strategies and plans involved. It also describes the obstacles and opportunities they foresee and the adjustments they think are necessary in order to be successful in farming.

The change that the process of generational succession brings about makes the farm business especially vulnerable as succession may influence both the decision to continue farming and the nature of the adjustments made within the business. Generational succession of the farm is a crucial moment that will determine whether the farm can adjust and therefore survive (Inwood and Sharp, 2012). Succession also allows for reorganisation and new opportunities to achieve accomplish economic growth. Lobley calls

this the "succession effect", and it promotes investment and enlargement (Lobley, 2010).

In this study, we use insights from the resilience literature to highlight the processes involved in evaluating opportunities and challenges that arise from changes. Resilience is about navigating and negotiating various paths, handling situations of change, and overcoming situations of greater or lesser severity that affect the life of an individual (Marshall, 2005). It involves both individual capacity and collective capacity in terms of offering a certain context: "resilience must be the result of both personal capacities and social, cultural and political assets" (Ungar, 2003). Resilience is thus seen as a process at both individual and societal level rather than a fixed condition, which means that the focus is placed on dynamic relationships and strategies. A young farmer is part of a social, cultural and political context, and he or she is deeply embedded in a certain physical environment – all of which are crucial to their profession and how they plan to make a living.

When studying the strategies and plans of young prospective farmers regarding processes of resilience, it is important to discuss how the students view their opportunities and limitations, as well as the goals and values that guide them. As shown in previous studies, traditions and the history of the family farm are important contextual factors (see, for example, Darnhofer et al., 2010). Hence, interwoven with running a family farm are traditions and responsibilities towards past, present and future generations (Price and Evans, 2009). The farmer has to consider both family goals and market trends (Inwood and Sharp, 2012). Young farmers' strategies should

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also be analysed from a gender perspective. Their thoughts relate to gendered family and work processes, and their strategies involve adapting to and challenging these processes. Several studies in Europe show that a majority of farms are transferred to the farmer's son during the process of generational succession (Hennessy and Rehman, 2007; Lobley, 2010). However, recent research shows that traditional patterns of succession such as primogeniture and the father choosing and socialising a son to become a successor are weakening (Brandth and Overrein, 2013; Wheeler et al., 2012).

The study builds on focus group interviews with students at an upper secondary school (with students aged 17–18) with an agricultural focus. Our aim is to analyse the gendered strategies of young agricultural students for future farming. Firstly, we identify the strategies expressed in student discussions on how to ensure that the farm business and the person's identity as a farmer develop in a positive way. Secondly, we discuss the opportunities and obstacles that the students foresee in generational succession and their future farming activities. Two keywords in this study are adaptation and renewal, which are central concepts in discussions on resilience.

It could be argued that the perspective of the younger generation has been overlooked. With some exceptions (for example, Vesala and Vesala, 2010; Rossier et al., 2009), few studies focus on young students/prospective farmers and their futures. The majority of studies concentrate on adults, with statistical studies mostly concentrating on the official owner of the farm (Price, 2012). The study also provides the platform for a theoretical discussion of how the concept of resilience may be helpful in analysing processes and changes that affect the strategies of prospective farmers. The empirical contribution is deeper knowledge of what promotes and limits the strategies of young agricultural students and of how they intend to deal with opportunities and obstacles. Such knowledge is important for the improvement of agricultural education. It also provides an additional framework for policymakers when designing support for farmers in rural Sweden and the EU. More knowledge of the view of prospective young farmers on generational succession and the gendered aspects of their experiences is also of great importance to farm advisers when attempting to minimise the stress that often emerges within the family during generational succession (Lobley, 2010).

2. Background and theoretical approach

2.1. Farm succession

Family is often the first choice when looking for a successor for reasons such as lower labour costs and a motivated workforce. The successor is rarely paid a salary in monetary form but may claim future means of production. Kennedy views succession as “a web of relationships” that ties generations together. The common goals are a viable farm and long-term sustainability (Kennedy, 1991). The transfer of the farm concerns both the property itself and more intangible assets, such as capital, knowledge and emotional values specific to the farm. These intangible assets are transferred both before and after the point when the right of ownership to the property is transferred (Lobley, 2010; Grubbström and Sooväli-Sepping, 2012; Price and Conn, 2012). Farming families tend to stay on the land as emotional bonds to land result in a reluctance to quit farming or to sell land to people other than family (Lange et al., 2011; Grubbström, 2011; Price, 2012). Emotional ties to the farm and the land may have their origins in both physical factors, such as attachments to certain fields or settings, and in more social and relational factors linked to family. This may be expressed as feelings of responsibility and ties to past, present and future generations (Price and Evans, 2009).

The transfer of ownership and the transfer of management duties do not necessarily occur simultaneously; both procedures are part of a process that may extend over time (Lange et al., 2011). *Succession* addresses the transfer of the management of the business, and *inheritance* refers to the transfer of ownership (Wheeler et al., 2012). During the transfer process, the successor may experience costs, the heaviest being that it can take a long time until generational succession takes place. Conflicts with siblings are also a possible outcome of the transfer process, as it may be difficult to find solutions that are accepted by all family members. Conflicts within the family about succession issues can also damage the farm business financially. Lange et al. emphasise that families with an open communication style experience less stress (Lange et al., 2011). The study of Wheeler et al. in Australia shows that succession planning among farmers seems to be decreasing. This generates uncertainty among the younger generation, and the farm will be less likely to undertake changes that promote a successful business (Wheeler et al., 2012). Other studies also demonstrate that farmers address the issue of succession quite late but by the time they reach 65, a majority of them has identified a successor (Lobley, 2010; Rossier et al., 2009). On the contrary, it has also been shown that a successor may be chosen early on in childhood, ensuring socialisation into the farming profession (Rossier, 2012; Grubbström and Sooväli-Sepping, 2012). It is apparent that generational succession relates to processes of resilience. Transferring the farm constitutes a challenge in terms of the capacity to cope with change, adapt and consider the possibility of renewal. It also involves resistance to change relating, for example, to traditions and in some cases conflicts between family members and across generations.

2.2. Gendered farming strategies

One recognised gendered pattern is patrilineal succession, whereby sons inherit the farm business and the land from their fathers. Such processes have contributed to the invisibility of women in farming (Alston, 2004). The strong sense of belonging to the land and being a part of an important family tradition that should not be broken is crucial to farming men. This is supported by women, and their roles have been characterised as complementing and assisting their husbands (Price and Conn, 2012). The work performed by male successors is also looked upon as capital invested in the farm by the oldest son (Flygare, 2012). An important share of the work behind a successful (or unsuccessful) farm is made invisible because it is “women's work”, which has a lower status (Saugeres, 2002). Sons are primed to become farmers while daughters learn to be farmer's wives (Brandth, 2002). Women, on the other hand, often enter farming through marriage (Shortall, 2002). A farmer's daughter may also fulfil her responsibilities towards the family and the farm by marrying a male farmer who can take responsibility for the farm while she works off-farm (Price and Evans, 2009). While women enter farming through marriage, it is not so common for them to become joint owners. In their study on female farmers in Sweden, Djurfeldt and Gooch found that less than half of the women interviewed were joint owners. In most cases, they had married a man with a farm and the common view was that the farm should stay in the man's family (Djurfeldt and Gooch, 2001).

The persistence of the patrilineal culture in family farming has its drawbacks; one example is gendered health issues. The identity of the male farmer involves independence and acting stoically; asking for help has a stigma attached (Price, 2012). A widely-held belief is that you can solve all problems by yourself or with the help of peers. This raises the question of whether this culture interacts with ongoing economic processes (Price, 2012). In other

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