



Of organic farmers and ‘good farmers’: Changing habitus in rural England

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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, numerous studies have identified the importance of cultural constructions of ‘good farming’ to farming practice. In this paper, we develop the ‘good farming’ construct through an empirical study of organic and conventional farmers, focussing on how change occurs. Drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital, habitus and fields, we argue that the dynamics of the ‘rules of the game’ in the agricultural field have simultaneously led to a broadening of the ‘good farming’ ideal, and to a fragmentation, whereby individual farmers prioritise a subset of this broad range. We demonstrate that gradual devaluation of existing ways to achieve cultural capital is essential to the development of new symbolic values. In line with this, we offer a critique of the implied static nature of cultural capital in the studies of farmer responses to agri-environmental schemes. We also point out that the alterations in perception and practices of farmers who converted to organic farming for ‘pragmatic’ reasons may be greater than sometimes implied.

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1. Introduction

Considerable literature in recent years has demonstrated the importance of ‘good farming’ ideals to farming practice. Proponents of the ‘good farming’ concept are consistent in their arguments that farmers gain social standing through adherence to a set of principles based on values and standards embedded in farming culture. Multiple studies have identified these ‘good farming’ symbols, such as high yields, tidy fields and good quality livestock (Gray, 1998; Silvasti, 2003; Burton, 2004; Stock, 2007; Burton et al., 2008; Haggerty et al., 2009; Hunt, 2010). Although the ‘good farming’ concept has been well established, the focus of these studies is typically on good farming symbols as they currently exist. Studies thus present a ‘snap-shot’ of current farming ideals, with little attention given to the critical issue of how these ideals change. Indeed, the adherence to ‘good farming’ standards is often identified as a reason for farmer resistance to change. For example, Burton (2004; Burton et al., 2008), in his UK-based research on ‘good farmers’, consistently emphasises the cultural resistance of farmers, particularly in response to agri-environmental schemes.

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However, farming practices clearly change over time, e.g. in response to new technologies, markets, and government policies. In particular, the issue of adoption of voluntary agri-environmental schemes has been widely studied (see Edwards-Jones, 2006 for a review). The choice to participate in an agri-environmental change, as well as other farm-level adaptations lead to changes in farming practices which can be expected to influence cultural norms and thus the definitions of ‘good farming’. For example, Haggerty et al. (2009) argue that considerable changes to both livestock production practices and standards of ‘good farming’ are occurring in response to changes in the political economy of New Zealand farming. Studies of farm-level responses to agricultural transformations thus show that changes are not confined to the farm enterprise, but extend to equally significant transformation within the cultural domain, i.e. to what is seen as necessary and acceptable to a farmer (Johnsen, 2004; Evans, 2009). The responsiveness to the (perceived) context also contributes to diversity. Indeed, various authors have also pointed out that definitions of ‘good farming’ differ between and within farm types (van der Ploeg, 2003; Haggerty et al., 2009; Hunt, 2010) and that there may be a geographic boundedness, i.e. local farmers are those that constitute the reference group (Hatch, 1992, p. 128). The features of ‘good farming’ are thus typically specific to regions and the commodities produced in them, reflecting skilled commodity production under regional conditions. However, despite noting diversity and change,

to date there has 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. In this paper, we develop the ‘good farmer’ construct, specifically focussing on these processes of change.

We developed our conceptualisation through analysis of empirical research with organic and conventional farmers in England. Organic farming is particularly appropriate for the study of change processes in relation to cultural norms given the impact it had on farming practices in recent decades. Although only 4.5% of UK land is certified as organic (Soil Association, 2010), this represents remarkable development for an industry which had only 300 producers in the early 1980s (Lobley et al., 2005). The recent boom in organic production has seen a cohort of conventional farmers converting to organic farming, lured at least in part by the greater returns on organic commodities and access to government conversion incentives, rather than the more holistic ideological approach of the early organic farmers (Fairweather, 1999; Padel, 2001; Darnhofer et al., 2005; Tranter et al., 2007). These ‘pragmatic’ converts to organic farming can be expected to be well acquainted with conventional symbols of ‘good farming’. However, they may be less able to reproduce these symbols using organic production methods, as these make it more difficult to achieve e.g. high yields and tidy fields. At the same time, the economic drivers that have influenced the uptake of organic farming have also influenced farmers who have not made the decision to convert. Declining economic returns of intensive approaches to agriculture undermine the underlying principle of ‘good farming’, i.e. that good farming symbols are a reliable indicator of a well-managed and thus profitable farm. For farmers who converted to organic farming and for those who remained conventional, definitions of ‘good farming’ can be expected to have changed considerably, yielding evidence of the processes involved in altering good farming ideals.

The aims of this paper are thus to develop a nuanced conceptualisation of how change occurs in standards of ‘good farming’ and to explore implications for understanding change in farmer practices. First, we develop our conceptualisation of change processes in farming culture, followed by a description of research methods. Our theoretical perspective is further developed by discussing findings from field research in two English case study sites. We conclude by challenging recent literature on how cultural orientation may impede farmers from participating in agri-environmental schemes and identify implications for understanding farmers who have converted to organic farming for ‘pragmatic’ reasons.

2. Conceptualising change in the good farming ideal

In this study we draw on Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of social reproduction to further develop the ‘good farming’ construct. This is the most commonly used theoretical approach to ‘good farming’, developed extensively by Burton (2004; Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011; Sutherland and Burton, 2011), and also Haggerty et al. (2009). Other approaches include the assessment of ‘good farming’ as reflecting religious and philosophical doctrines (Silvasti, 2003), substantiality (Gray, 1998), reflexivity (Stock, 2007), and the agency of orchards (Hunt, 2010).

Bourdieu (1986) contends that there are three primary forms of wealth, or capital: economic capital (material and financial property), social capital (networks of social connections and mutual obligations) and cultural capital (prestige, status in the community). All three represent different forms of power, and as such can, under some conditions, be converted into the other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997). Although all capital types are ultimately generated through labour, economic capital is conceptualised as the root of other capital types, making investment in other capital types possible

(Bourdieu, 1986). In Bourdieu’s conceptualisation, existing social relations are reinforced through the production and reproduction of these capitals, achieved through socialisation, education and varying degrees of access to the three capital types.

Burton’s (2004; Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa, 2011) work in particular draws on Bourdieu to demonstrate the importance of cultural capital in farming practice. Burton’s argument is essentially that farmers are unlikely to develop favourable attitudes towards the environment through engagement in environmental schemes, because the current schemes do not enable them to demonstrate farming skill, and thus prevent the creation of valued cultural symbols (cultural capital). Environmental schemes thus have both an economic cost (in terms of farm productivity) and a social cost (appreciation by other farmers). He argues that to ensure long-term change in environmental orientation, schemes need to allow farmers to develop and display skills associated with producing environmental goods.

In this paper, we argue that to adequately understand change processes, we need to go beyond the concept of cultural capital to focus on Bourdieu’s conceptions of habitus, field and ‘rules of the game’. Bourdieu argued that change occurs at the intersection of class dispositions (habitus) and the field in which the individual acts (Swartz, 1997: 141). Bourdieu defines habitus as:

a socialised body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action within that world. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81)

Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time (Bourdieu, 1984: 170). Dispositions to act are thus shaped by past events and structures; are influenced by current practices and structures; and also – importantly – are conditioned by our very perceptions of these events and structures (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus is thus responsive to the context in which farmers act. This explains why farmers managing different farm types are likely to have different symbols of ‘good farming’, or farmers managing similar farm types but in different geographic locations are just as likely to also have different symbols (Hatch, 1992, p. 130). The fact that the individual farmer’s perception of the context plays an important role contributes to explaining why there are differences even within farmers managing the same type of farms in the same geographic location (van der Ploeg, 2003; Johnsen, 2004; Hunt, 2010). Moreover, if habitus is developed in dialogue with the context, it would indicate that structural adjustments at the farm-level and cultural norms are interrelated, i.e. restructure one another (Evans, 2009; Schneider et al., 2010), although the influence is unlikely to be immediate or predictable.

For Bourdieu, a ‘field’ is an arena of production characterised by the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate e.g. cultural capital (Swartz, 1997: 117). The ‘rules of the game’ associated with each field become internalised in the participants’ habitus. As long as the ‘rules of the game’ are stable, individuals with similar habitus can be expected to respond in similar ways. However, when the ‘rules of the game’ change, creative responses are often required. Some authors (e.g. Jenkins, 1992) have noted that change might also happen without external pressure, since habitus informs but does not limit creativity.

Farming can be seen as a ‘field’, with a range of players and distinct forms of economic, social and cultural capital. The capitals held by farmers include the economic capital required for agricultural production (e.g., land, buildings, machinery), social capital (e.g. networks, social relations and mutual obligations) and cultural capital (prestige derived from commonly accepted symbols of ‘good farming’). These symbols may include even, weed-free fields

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