

Till death do us part: Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life through the lens of ‘Insiderness’

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ABSTRACT

The senior generation’s unwillingness to relinquish managerial duties and retire is a globally recognized characteristic of intergenerational family farm transfer. This is despite the array of financial incentives put in place to stimulate and entice the process. Applying Rowles’ concept of ‘insiderness’ as a theoretical framework, this paper brings into focus the suitability and appropriateness of previous and existing farm transfer policy strategies, by presenting an insightful, nuanced analysis of the deeply embedded attachment older farmers have with their farms, and how such a bond can stifle the necessary hand over of the farm business to the next generation. This research employs a multi-method triangulation design, consisting of a self-administered questionnaire and an Irish adaptation of the International FARMTRANSFERS Survey in conjunction with complimentary Problem-Centred Interviews, to generate a comprehensive insight into the intricate, multi-level farmer-farm relationship in later life. The overriding themes to emerge from the content analysis of the empirical research are farmer’s inherent desire to stay rooted in place in old age and also to maintain legitimate connectedness within the farming community by remaining active and productive on the farm. Additionally, there is a strong sense of nostalgia attributed to the farm, as it is found to represent a mosaic of the farmer’s achievements as well as being a landscape of memories. The paper concludes by suggesting that a greater focus on the farmer-farm relationship has the potential to finally unite farm transfer policy efforts with the mind-set of its targeted audience, after decades of disconnect.

KEYWORDS: family farming; insiderness; succession; retirement; generational renewal; rural sustainability

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The survival, continuity and future prosperity of the agricultural sector, traditional family farm model and broader sustainability of rural society ultimately depends on an age-diverse farming population. With a steady decline in the number of young farm families reported as being key in the demoralization of rural communities in which the farm is located (Ball and Wiley, 2005; Goeller, 2012), and the recent declaration by European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Phil Hogan, that a priority for future CAP reforms must focus on generational renewal (European Commission, 2017), it is increasingly clear that a major challenge presents itself in the area of intergenerational family farm transfer. Intergenerational family farm transfer, encompassing three separate yet interrelated processes of succession, retirement and inheritance (Gasson and Errington, 1993), is an integral facet of farm management. While present attempts to confront the global demographic

trend of an ageing farming population and a low level of land mobility (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Bogue, 2013; Chiswell, 2014; Fischer and Burton, 2014; Zagata and Sutherland, 2015), have added significantly to existing knowledge in this field, there are numerous, intricate emotional facets affecting the older generation’s farm transfer decision-making process, which for the most part have been neglected (Conway *et al.*, 2016). The outcome; a derailment of the process in many cases (*ibid*).

This paper, drawing on gerontological geographer, Graham Rowles’ (1983a) concept of ‘insiderness’, contextualises the difficulty and reluctance to ‘step aside’ and retire from farming (Foskey, 2005; Loblely *et al.*, 2010; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Fasina and Inegbedion, 2014) that continues to be the mainstay in many rural areas globally. The paper probes into the subjective experiences of farmers in the Republic of Ireland in later life and unearths a layer of understanding and attachment, both implicit and explicit, between farmer and farm, that we argue must be central to policies aimed at facilitating family farm intergenerational transfer. Reinforcing the

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urgency, is the realisation that this phenomenon has resulted in significant socio-economic challenges for young people aspiring to embark on a career in farming (Kirkpatrick, 2013), with adverse implications not only on the development trajectory of individual family farms and rural communities, but also on the production efficiency and economic growth of the agri-food sector as a whole (ADAS, 2004; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Goeller, 2012). In the Republic of Ireland, young people's entry into farming is particularly inflexible, due to the fact that entry to the sector is predominately by inheritance or purchasing highly inflated farmland (Gillmor, 1999; NESC, 1997; Hennessy and Rehman, 2007); entry via leasing of land or partnership arrangements, common in many countries throughout the world, are not widely practiced (ibid). Such a cultural anomaly requires immediate policy intervention. A recent report on 'Land Mobility and Succession in Ireland' claims the lack of land mobility (i.e. transfer of land from one farmer to another, or from one generation to the next) currently experienced in the Republic of Ireland is stifling agricultural growth by preventing young 'enthusiastic' farmers gaining access to productive assets (Bogue, 2013).

1.2 Policy interventions

In response to rigidity in the agrarian system, the policy environment in the Republic of Ireland has explored various mechanisms of financially stimulating and enticing farm transfer over the past four decades. Little change however, in attitude amongst the older generation towards intergenerational transfer has come about to date, resulting in an on-going resistance or at best ambivalence toward the process (Commins and Kelleher 1973; Ryan, 1995; Gillmor, 1999; Bika, 2007; Bogue, 2013; Leonard *et al.*, 2017; Conway *et al.*, 2017). Conway *et al.* (2016) argue however that such policy measures aimed at facilitating land mobility from one generation to the next were excessively preoccupied with financial incentives and have 'little or no regard' for the older farmer's emotional welfare (p.166). In particular, Conway *et al.*, (ibid) strongly criticised the eligibility requirements for farmers entering the most recent largely unsuccessful Early Retirement Scheme for farmers (ERS 3, June, 2007), which included a clause that stated that 'Persons intending to retire under the scheme shall cease agricultural activity forever' (DAFM, 2007). This type of language and sentiment was completely oblivious to the consciousness of many older farmers. Indeed Conway *et al.* (2016) found that the potential loss of one's lifelong accumulation of symbolic capital, with associated characteristics of identity, status, position and authority, upon transferring managerial control and retiring is a dilemma that farmers find difficult to accept and ultimately resist (ibid).

Equally it could be argued that the lack of any great understanding of a farmer's psyche is also clearly visible in the various attempts to develop 'answers' usually in the form of tax initiatives (Meehan, 2012; Leonard *et al.*, 2017) or unconventional tenures like Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs) for example. While there is merit in such structures, they do not, we would argue, fully grasp the enormity of a farmer's attachment to his/her farm. Specifically, not unlike elsewhere in the world, JFVs, including arrangements such as farm partnerships, contract rearing and share farming (Turner and Hambly, 2005; ADAS, 2007;

Ingram and Kirwan, 2011), have recently been promoted within Irish policy discourses as strategies that act as a stepping stone to successful farm transfer (DAFM, 2011; Hennessy, 2014), subsequently helping to alleviate concerns of an ageing farming population and maximize production efficiency. Ingram and Kirwan (2011) note however that while it appears that some older farmers are willing in principle to offer JFV arrangements, when it comes to the reality of 'handing over control (or partial control) of a business that they have been in charge of for perhaps 40 or 50 years' (p.294) they are often reluctant to do so. Indeed, research indicates that the older generation can experience difficulty relinquishing managerial control and ownership of the family farm, even to their own children (Barclay *et al.*, 2012; Price and Conn, 2012; Whitehead *et al.*, 2012; Conway *et al.*, 2017). Kirkpatrick's (2013) study in the USA explains however that 'in many cases the older farmers' sense of place and purpose attached to the family farm' supersedes any fiscal incentives that encourages 'the handing over of the family farm to the next generation' (p.4).

Consequently, if tax relief schemes or JFVs arrangements are unable to progress the desire for generational renewal on the farm, what are the obstructions that continue to frustrate or delay the process and how might these be addressed? It is to this and the concept of farmer-farm attachment that we now consider.

1.3 Farmer-farm attachment

This paper brings into focus the suitability and appropriateness of previous and existing farm transfer policy strategies, by generating a comprehensive insight into the deeply embedded relationship older farmers have with their farms; emulating Shucksmith and Hermann's (2002), contention of the need to examine 'farmers' own ways of seeing the world' (p.39). While Conway *et al.*'s (2016) research into the human side of farm transfer identified the complex psychodynamic and sociodynamic factors that influence the farm transfer decision-making process, existing research in the field has yet to thoroughly describe or explain the level of emotional attachment placed on the family farm and its embodied contents (i.e. land, farmhouse, livestock). These 'embodied contents' are often developed over several generations, and as such the bond created often affects the older farmer's ability to deal with and accept the inevitable challenges and changes brought about by the 'twin process' of succession and retirement. Price and Conn (2012) previously argued that 'allowing for succession is an emotional rather than rational process (p.101), resulting in decisions on whether to implement the process or not, being based more on 'heart than head' (Taylor *et al.*, 1998, p.568). It is therefore argued here that an in-depth understanding and knowledge of farmer-farm attachment is necessary and will aid in the modification of existing policies and/or the development of novel strategies that sensitively deal with problematic issues surrounding intergenerational farm transfer. Perhaps most importantly of all is the contention of this research that in fully understanding the farmer-farm connection and allowing this to inform the type of decisions being made, this will not only enable greater intergenerational transfers to take place but more significantly will help secure the well-being of farmers as they age.

Furthermore, given that succession planning is a relatively uncommon practice within the farming community

(Kimhi and Lopez, 1999; Burton and Fischer 2015), and there seems to be a cultural expectation that 'farmers don't retire' (Conway *et al.*, 2016, p.172), this paper has global relevance and will be of particular interest to countries throughout the European Union where the high age profile of the farming community and the low rate of succession and retirement have been matters of concern and unease for decades (Commins and Kelleher 1973; Gasson and Errington, 1993; Bika, 2007; Hennessy and Rehman, 2007; Zagata and Sutherland, 2015). European demographic trends reveal an inversion of the age pyramid with those aged 65 years and over constituting the fastest growing sector of the farming community (Zagata and Sutherland, 2015). Preliminary results from Eurostat's most recent Farm Structure Survey indicate that 6% of farmers were aged 35 and under in 2013, while over 55% were aged 55 and older (European Commission, 2013; European Commission, 2015). Furthermore, Eurostat's Farm Structure Survey highlights that for each farmer younger than 35 years of age, there were 9 farmers older than 55 years (European Commission, 2012; European Commission, 2015). The situation in the Republic of Ireland is closely analogous to that of its European counterparts; in 2010, only 6.2% of Irish landowners were under 35 years of age whilst 51.4% were over 55 years old (CSO, 2012). Between 2000 and 2010, those over 65 years increased by 31%, while those within the 55 to 65 age bracket increased by 26%, with a 52.8% reduction in the amount of farmers aged less than 35 years recorded (*ibid*).

The next section presents the theoretical framework adopted, followed by a description of the methodological approach employed, while thereafter the empirical evidence is used to explore the 'farmers' own ways of seeing the world' (Shucksmith and Hermann's 2002, p.39). The latter part of the paper expands on this evidence and examines potential pathways that we argue should inform those policy makers and key stakeholders who have the means and ability to deliver interventions and programmes for older farmers. The directions for future research are also discussed.

2. Theoretical approach

This study is driven by a theoretical gap in the understanding of farmer-farm relationship in later life. A growing body of work has pointed out that personal experience gives meaning to places and contributes to self-identity (Chaudhury, 2008). Arguably, a formative work in the area of place attachment and identity amongst rural elderly persons in old age is Rowles's (1983a) concept of 'insideness' (after Relph, 1976). In considering the geographies of later life, Rowles (1990) explains that insideness involves 'an intimate involvement with a place that is grounded in personal history and qualitatively differentiates this place from space outside' (p.107). Rowles' (1983a) three-year, in-depth ethnographic research on elderly people living in a rural Appalachian community in the U.S.A. conceptualized three key dimensions of place attachment: physical, social and autobiographical insideness. Although direct application of these concepts will be discussed in the results sections, it is instructive to define each here. Physical insideness is characterized by 'familiarity and habitual routines of habitation within the home setting' (Oswald and Wahl, 2005, p.29), resulting in the sense that an individual is able to 'wear the setting like a

Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life glove' (Rowles, 1983b, p.114). This 'body awareness' of space (Rowles and Ravidal, 2002; Rowles, 1993), results from an intimacy with one's 'physical configuration stemming from the rhythm and routine of using the space over many years' (Rowles, 1984, p.146). Physical insideness is also considered to significantly contribute to general satisfaction and well-being in old age (Rowles, 2006). Rowles (1983a) suggests that the intimacy of physical insideness is supplemented by a sense of social insideness, or immersion. Social insideness is fostered and developed through 'everyday social interaction and the performance of particular social roles in a neighbourhood' (Riley, 2012, p.763). Furthermore, social insideness is considered to be particularly significant in old age, as one may need to draw on these long-term relationships in accommodating declining physical capabilities and health in later life (Rowles, 2008; Riley, 2012). Finally, the third sense of insideness in later life is 'autobiographical insideness'. Autobiographical insideness extends beyond the physical setting or social milieu to create an environment that has 'a temporal depth of meaning' (Rowles, 1983a, p. 303). Peace *et al.* (2005) add that autobiographical insideness is 'based on time and space, a historical legacy of life lived within a particular environment' (p.194). Autobiographical insideness has been suggested to be the most relevant to describe older people's attachment to place because it is embedded in memories of significant experiences, relationships and events over one's lifetime (Rowles, 1993; Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Burns *et al.*, 2012). According to Rowles (1983b) this provides 'a sense of identity and an ever-present source of reinforcement for a biography interpreted from the retrospective vista of a life review' (p.114). Older people with strong ties to place may feel more mastery as well as a greater sense of security and belonging (Burns *et al.*, 2012; Lecovich, 2014).

The three senses of insideness, expressing different, yet inextricably intertwined aspects of the rural elderly populations' affinity with their home environment, have been extensively drawn upon by rural geographers, gerontological experts and occupational therapists investigating the importance of space and place-identity in old age (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000; Seamon, 2014; Degnen, 2016). In a farming context, Riley (2012) previously employed the concept of insideness to explore the challenges and issues surrounding the occupational cessation and retirement relocation of retired farming couples in the United Kingdom, however there have been no studies carried out to date which have explicitly explored Rowles's three interrelated constructs of place attachment in later life amongst older, active and productive members of the farming community. While it is acknowledged that the concept of insideness does not cover every facet dictating the farm transfer decision-making process, it does contribute to identifying current needs and priorities within policy and research by providing insight into the subjective experience of farmers growing old on the farm, rather than relying solely on aggregate data. This aids in the interpretation of existing quantitative results in the field and thereby increases policy relevance.

3. Methodology

This research employs a multi-method triangulation design used by Conway *et al.*, (2016), in conjunction with a preliminary exploration of data obtained from an Irish

adaptation of the International FARMTRANSFERS Survey in an attempt to obtain a complete picture of the intricate, multi-level farmer-farm attachment in later life and the suitability of previous farm transfer policy strategies. A detailed survey was initially undertaken with 324 farmers aged 55 and over in attendance at a series of 'Transferring the Family Farm' clinics (TFFC) hosted by Teagasc (the Agriculture and Food Development Authority in Ireland) to investigate the attitudes and behavioural intentions of the farming community towards succession and retirement. The reasoning for specifically focussing on farmers aged 55 and over is that one of the terms and conditions for farmers intending to retire under the 2007 Early Retirement Scheme (ERS 3) was that participants must have been 'between his/her 55th and 66th birthday' to be eligible (DAFM, 2007). Over 2,800 farmers attended these clinics held at 11 different locations throughout the Republic of Ireland in September and October 2014. Sixty percent (n=194) of questionnaire respondents also gave their consent to be interviewed in more depth at a later date.

In order to validate, strengthen reliability and build on the data gathered at the TFFC, the second phase of data collection involved a list of copyright questions derived from the International FARMTRANSFERS Survey, refined for Irish conditions, being included in the 2014 Land Use/Mobility Farm Survey conducted by Teagasc (see footnote 1). Lobley and Baker (2012) explain that the FARMTRANSFERS project is an international collaborative effort around a common research instrument that 'yields a range of (largely quantitative) data relating to the pattern, process and speed of succession and retirement which provides a firm base for future inquiries utilising different methodologies' (p.15). To date, the survey, based on an original design developed by the late Professor Andrew Errington of the University of Plymouth in 1991 (Errington and Tranter, 1991), has been replicated in 10 countries and 8 states in the U.S.A. and completed by over 15,600 farmers throughout the world (Lobley and Baker, 2012).

The FARMTRANSFERS data collected from a stratified random sample of 309 farmers aged 51 and over

included in the 2014 Land Use/Mobility Farm Survey and Choice Experiment analysis, representing over 80,000 farms nationally, combined with the 43,000 invitations sent out by Teagasc to each of their farmer clients to attend the TFFC, provides a thoroughly comprehensive nationally representative sample of the Irish farming population across a broad spectrum of farming operations, typologies, geographical location and scale. Such an expansive sample of Irish farmers is important due to the fact that different farming regions exist around the country, where boundaries span unevenly across county perimeters. The largest concentration of small sized farms occurs in the Western and Border regions for example, with the largest farms in the South-East, Mid-East and Dublin areas (Lafferty *et al.*, 1999).

The next phase of data collection involved a Problem-Centred Interview (PCI) approach, to peel back the layers and broaden the two farmer survey responses and in doing so, inform possible new policies. Witzel (2000) explains that PCI can be combined with questionnaires in order to 'solve the problems arising in connection with samples and to relate the results generated by different procedures' (p.3). Following frequency distribution and cross-tabulation analysis of aggregate data obtained at the TFFC and the FARMTRANSFERS survey on the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) programme, in conjunction with an additional review of relevant literature in the field, it was possible to draw up a specific PCI guideline containing preformulated questions on the issues that were identified to be subjectively significant to the sample farming population. A 10% (n=19) sample of farmers recruited at the TFFC for the interview phase of data collection were sourced using a systematic sampling technique (see Table 1) and subsequently interviewed from May until August 2015.

Given the personal nature of the issues under investigation the use of individual face-to-face interviews in the homes of the respondents was deemed the most appropriate means of obtaining information. The interviews lasted up to 2.5 hours and were recorded, transcribed verbatim and assigned pseudonyms to protect participant's privacy. Content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was used to analyse the

Table 1: Interviewees' Details

Pseudo Name	Gender	Age	Farming Enterprise	Regional Location	Considered Retirement	Succession Plan in Place
Frank	Male	57	Mixed livestock	West	Yes	Yes
Luke	Male	69	Mixed Livestock	West	Maybe	No
Dominic	Male	77	Mixed Livestock	West	Maybe	No
Rory	Male	66	Sheep	West	No	No
Andrew	Male	64	Beef	West	Maybe	No
David	Male	70	Beef	North West	Maybe	No
Thomas	Male	80	Sheep and Tillage	North West	Yes	No
Sean	Male	75	Dairy and Poultry	North East	No	No
Mark	Male	61	Dairy	East	No	Yes
Claire	Female	82	Mixed Livestock and Tillage	East	No	No
Josh	Male	70	Tillage (Crop Production)	South East	Yes	No
Jack	Male	72	Dairy	South East	No	No
Ian	Male	67	Dairy	South	No	No
John	Male	70	Mixed Livestock	South	No	No
Colm	Male	71	Mixed Livestock	South West	No	Yes
Eimear	Female	65	Beef	South West	No	No
Brian	Male	85	Dairy	Midlands	Yes	No
Richard	Male	67	Beef	Midlands	Yes	No
Aoife	Female	68	Mixed Livestock	Midlands	No	No

data collected and identify categories and themes. Relevant quotes from the interviews were then integrated into the various themes in order to support particular findings.

4. Results and Discussion

The presented findings are the result of a triangulation of quantitative survey data and complimentary qualitative Problem-Centred Interviews maintaining the same foci. Findings from both the TFFC and FARMTRANSFERS survey reveal that there is a significant cohort of farmers in the Republic of Ireland that do not plan to retire from farming in the future (see Table 2). Of those who are open to the idea, Conway *et al.* (2016) previously identified the ‘divergence of opinion and uncertainty between retirement expectations and retirement realisations, resulting in the decision to retire being difficult to execute and follow through’ (p.170). This finding is consistent with psychological research, showing that attitudes are not necessarily related to behaviours (e.g., Ajzen, 1991).

Correlating survey findings also illustrate that there is a substantial percentage of farmers who have identified a successor (see Table 3), signifying a resurgence in demand from young people for a career in farming, resulting in an anticipated renaissance in agriculture (Chiswell, 2014) and, by extension, a rejuvenation of rural life (Teagasc, 2011; Goeller, 2012; Marcus, 2013).

Interviews identified however that farmers are ill prepared for succession with 84% of participants not having

Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life a succession plan in place (see Table 1). This finding is analogous with results obtained from the nationally representative sample of farmers surveyed in the FARMTRANSFERS survey which found that 67% do not have a succession plan in place. Moreover, 40% of FARMTRANSFERS respondents were found to not even have a will in place. Kimhi and Lopez (1999) previously highlighted that succession planning is unpopular within the farming community and therefore rarely occurs while the older generation is still alive, resulting in significant difficulties for the successor in waiting to integrate and evolve into a more formidable role in family farm business (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011). Gasson and Errington (1993) argue that the older farmers must be aware of the needs of the next generation and relinquish ownership rights of the farm to ensure continued involvement and interest in the family farm business. If this is not the case, the farmer runs the risk of not having a successor at all because the younger generation may go in search of alternative employment elsewhere in order to achieve their career ambitions and personal development (Kimhi and Lopez, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 2013) resulting in potentially good young farmers being lost to the agricultural sector (Nuthall and Old, 2017). Such a potentially detrimental phenomenon, requires urgent attention. Taking into account the senior generation’s opinions and feelings towards farm transfer policy strategies however, 88% of TFFC questionnaire respondents agree that ‘policy makers and practitioners need to have a better understanding of the world as farmers see it’.

Table 2: Retirement Plans

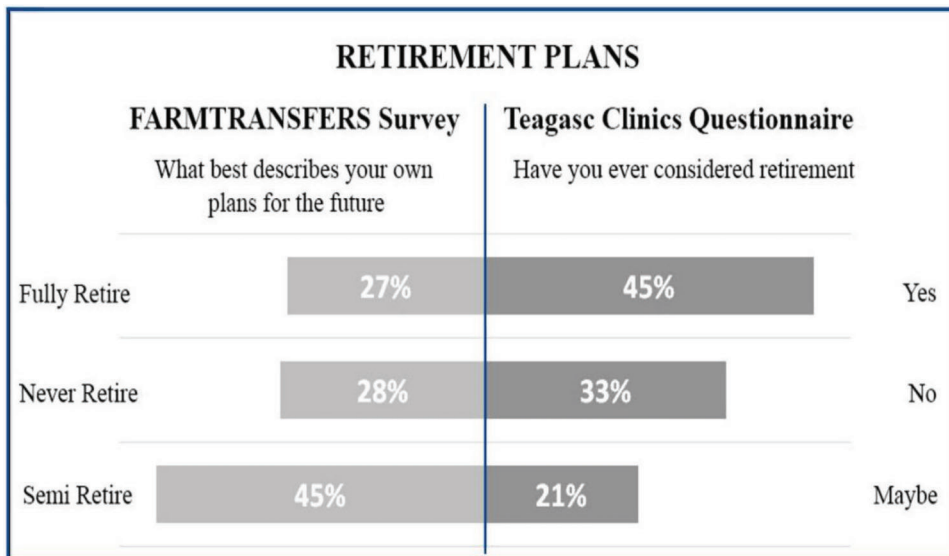
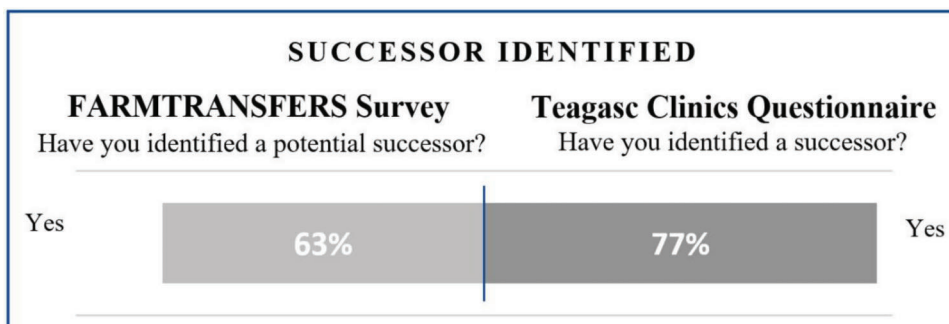


Table 3: Successor Identified



Winter (1997) previously highlighted that ‘for too long the policy debate has been conducted with little reference to farmers or to their view of the world’ (p.377). Furthermore, 88% of farmers surveyed at the TTFC who have not considered retiring from farming in the future agree that ‘the lifestyle quality from being a farmer is far greater than any financial incentive to leave farming.’ When asked more specifically about the suitability of the terms and conditions of the 2007 ERS 3, interviews reveal that there exists a clear disconnect between such policy measures and the mind-set of respondents:

‘Ceasing all farming activity was a ridiculous rule. It was almost as if you couldn’t even own a pair of wellingtons anymore and that is crazy. A lot of the rules and regulations brought into farming here in Ireland tend to be half baked’. (Josh, aged 70)

‘Asking farmers to stop farming forever was very much a very backward step, because I think it would end up creating depression amongst farmers. Cutting a farmer adrift from their farm at that stage of their life would leave them in a very lonely place’. (Frank, aged 57)

‘I thought that last retirement scheme was a disaster. I mean requesting that we couldn’t do bits and pieces around our farms, it was bureaucracy gone mad. It was a no brainer that it wouldn’t work and whoever came up with that scheme hadn’t a clue about farming. We are talking about a way of life here, how could we be expected to cease agricultural activity forever?’. (Colm, aged 71)

As such, while certain processes of contemporary rural restructuring may have impacted on the economic and social landscape of farming in the Republic of Ireland (Kinsella et al., 2000; Ní Laoire, 2005), empirical research findings indicate that there still exists an overwhelming significance of ‘intrinsic’ farming values over profit maximisation in Irish agriculture (Price and Conn, 2012; Duesberg et al., 2013; Conway et al., 2016; Duesberg et al., 2017). It is therefore imperative that existing and future policies and programmes encouraging intergenerational farm transfer take into account the emotional value attached to the farm and farming occupation ‘beyond the economic’ (Pile, 1990, p.147).

The overriding themes of farmer-farm attachment to emerge from the content analysis of the empirical research were (i) rooted in place (ii) legitimate connectedness and (iii) sense of nostalgia. These themes will now be discussed in the next sections, to provide a detailed insight into the level of insideness that the older generation of the farming community attach to their farm. Interestingly, despite the patriarchal prominence of farming highlighted in previous research (Gasson and Errington, 1993, Brandth, 2002; Price and Evans, 2006), empirical findings in this study did not uncover any great variation between male and female farmer-farm relationships. This may be explained by Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Through regular practice in a social setting (such as the farm in the context of this research), Bourdieu explains that individuals develop habitus, ‘the set of dispositions or learned behaviours which provides individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives’ (Blackledge, 2001, p.349). Habitus thus functions as an ‘internal compass’, orientating and guiding one’s social behaviour and

practices of everyday life (Panagiotopoulos, 1990; Maclean, et al., 2010). Research respondents, of both genders, were found to share common deep-seated dispositions towards their farms, having lived there for most, if not all of their lives. We thus seemed unnecessary in this particular research to differentiate whether study participants were male or female. Instead we opted to utilize a gender-neutral ‘labelling’ approach to identify farmers who participated in this study.

4.1 Rooted in place

Results from the empirical research illustrate the deep-rooted familiarity farmers have with their farms. Exploring the interplay between people and place within agriculture, Gray (1999) previously used the phrase ‘being at home on the hills’ to capture ‘the special, sensual and intimate attachment people feel towards the hills in which they spend so much time, a feeling of being in their proper place’ (p.441). Such a close acquaintanceship was evident from the TFFC survey results, with 92% of respondents agreeing that they spend most of their time at home on their farms. The motif of insideness is appropriate here as it suggests that older people develop an intense sense of familiarity and belonging in their home environment late in life, which is notably distinct from the outside world (ibid). When asked what their lives would be like if they no longer lived on the farm, interviewees found it hard to visualise what this might be like or that it might ever happen, for example:

‘I can’t see myself retiring and heading off to Costa Brava or the likes of for the rest of my life, oh no, I certainly can’t. I find that when I go away somewhere on holidays for a few days with my wife, that I’d be anxious to get back to the farm, I’d be really missing it you see. I suppose I am kind of institutionalised on the farm at this stage... I’d be way out of my depth living somewhere else’. (Andrew, aged 64)

‘I know the older we get, we might not be able to look after ourselves, or the mind might go and then of course you’d have to be shipped off to a nursing home, but while I am alive and well I’m staying put on the farm. You see if it is somewhere where you have been born and lived all your life, it’s hard not to be hugely attached to the place, it’s part of who I am now, I don’t want to be anywhere else’. (David, aged 70)

These findings illustrate that the older generation have become almost ‘physiologically melded’ into the farm environment over time (Rowles, 1984, p.146). Such rootedness is referred to as physical insideness (Rowles, 1983a). This innate intimacy or ‘body awareness’ (Rowles and Ravdal, 2002) of the farm space, is also found to equip farmers with an intricate understanding of the environmental conditions and limitations of their land, confirming previous research (Gray, 1998; Burton, 2004; Yarwood and Evans, 2006; Burton et al., 2008).

‘I know this place like the back of my hand. My father lord rest him taught me all he knew about the farm and my son now looks up to me to teach him all I know. I know all the fields that need an extra bit of slurry in the spring and what fields are best to fatten the bullocks over the summer. No books or computers can teach you

things like that. The point I am trying to make is you cannot underestimate a lifetime of experience on the farm'. (Luke, aged 69)

These findings suggest that the criteria of previous early retirement schemes (ERS 3), which stressed that 'continued participation in farming is not permitted' (DAFM, 2007), may in fact have had negative effects on farm performance by creating critical shortages of experienced personnel who hold an invaluable store of locally specific lay and tacit knowledge developed over years of regularized interaction and experience working on the farm (Conway *et al.*, 2016). Interviews also identified that the idiosyncratic 'rhythms, routines, and rituals' (Rowles *et al.*, 2003, p.172) of farm life, shaped and internalised by the daily and seasonal labour-intensive demands of working on the farm, fosters a heightened sense of physical insiderness for the older generation:

'I'm always working the land. I'd be spreading fertilizer and fixing fences and bringing the cows in and out of the milking parlour twice a day. I hope to spend the rest of my days keeping busy on the farm... at least while I am fit and able to do so'. (Jack, aged 72)

'In a way, you are pretty much married to the farm... because you can't just decide that you are going to take off for six weeks and walk around Borneo or the Himalayas, no, no, there's always work to be done on the farm, 365 days a year'. (Josh, aged 70)

Riley (2011) previously explained that integrating with and tending to the needs of animals plays a central role in organizing and structuring the day-to-day and annual lives of farmers, with many claiming that such tasks are what 'they got out of bed for' (p.23). Glover (2011) add that the farm represents 'who the farmer is' (p.9). The cessation of occupational engagement upon retirement however 'not only left voids in terms of time and empty routine structures, but also the loss of a lens through which they channelled very particular understandings of, and relationships with, specific places and practices' (Riley, 2011, p.23). Riley (2012) also noted that retirees felt 'lost' upon ceasing their 'association with, and everyday routines and actions within', the farm space (p.770). Interviews identified that the familiarity and habitual routines within the farm environment also offers therapeutic benefits to older farmers, in an almost sanctuary-like setting:

'Space is the most wonderful thing in the world to have. If there was something or another bothering me, I find there is nothing better than to just walk up the fields early in the morning or late in the evening, and look back across the land, and watch all my lovely cattle grazing and thriving... your head would be a lot clearer after that'. (Aoife, aged 68)

'I love every inch of this place, it makes me feel good. I love being able to walk through the fields, checking on my crops and just enjoying the nature all around me, it's quite therapeutic for me in fact. As I have lived here my whole life I probably take it for granted sometimes just how special it really is'. (Josh, aged 70)

Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life

Rossier (2012) previously noted that keeping active on the farm may 'improve the quality of life, and serve to crate meaning' (p.84), while Price and Conn (2012) add that farmers 'engage with animals and nature in a spatial arena where legacy, culture belonging home and work are intertwined' (p.95). Similarly, from an Australian perspective, Guillifer and Thomson (2006) explain that the emotional bond that farmers have developed with their land over their lifetime, acts as a source of 'identity, refuge and comfort' in old age (p.91).

The general satisfaction and well-being that elderly farmers attribute to the 'physical insiderness' of the farm space and associated routines (Riley, 2012), offers potential for understanding why many are unwilling to recognize or accept their physical limitations on the farm (Peters *et al.*, 2008) and instead, continue to traverse spaces that would appear to be beyond their level of physiological competence (Ponzetti, 2003), with subsequent risks to their health and safety. Such a phenomenon requires immediate policy intervention, as almost half of all farm fatalities in Ireland and many other European Union member states involve farmers aged 65 and over (HSA, 2013).

4.2 Legitimate connectedness

Research findings also reveal that the farm provides the farmer with a sense of legitimate social connectedness within the farming community. Seventy-eight percent of questionnaire respondents at the TTFC agree that farming provides them with a sense of belonging and a position in society. Riley (2012) explains that 'just as the boundaries of work, home and leisure are often indivisible on the farm, so too are the nature of social interactions taking place there', as they are woven into the everyday activities and routines of the farm (p.770). Furthermore, 71% of TTFC questionnaire respondents also agree with the notion that farming is not only their job, but also their lifestyle, pastime and social outlet. Interviews reveal the manner in which the farm and its practices provides a fulcrum around which social interactions can take place:

'I became more and more involved in various farming organisations and activities in the area when my husband, lord have mercy on him, passed away. The farm ties me in with these groups you see, we are all farmers there, we have a common ground. I find that it's great to mix with like-minded people on an on-going basis... it has helped me cope with his loss in a way'. (Eimear, aged 65)

'I don't do anything else only farm and go to the local mart once or twice a week. Even if I'm not selling or buying sheep I'd still go to the mart, I enjoy the social aspect of it you see. I always go into the canteen when I'm at the mart and sit down and have a chat with the lads about farming and the weather.... things like that'. (Rory, aged 66)

'I have been actively involved in breeding Texel sheep on the farm for the last 30 years. I love the buzz out of breeding, finding the next big thing at the pedigree sales, meeting and competing with the other breeders for prizes... ah it's a great pastime to have as well as everything else'. (Frank, aged 57)

Rowles's (1983a) concept of 'social insiderness', which is fostered and developed through 'everyday social exchanges and relationships' and 'a sense of being well known and knowing others' (Burns *et al.*, 2012, p.3) is evident here. Social Insiderness provides farmers with a sense of belonging by allowing them to integrate and become a part of the 'social fabric of the community' (Rowles, 1983a, p.302), thus enhancing their emotive attachment to the farm in old age. Social insiderness is considered to be particularly significant in later life, as one may need to draw on these long-term relationships for help and social support if they happen to experience age related physical impairments and disabilities (Ponzetti, 2003; Riley, 2012). Sutherland and Burton (2011) previously noted that farmers feel that they can 'count on the neighbour in an emergency' (p.246). Research findings also illustrate the considerable social significance attributed to being approved and recognised as a 'good farmer' in a community of like-minded farmers, reiterating previous research (Burton; 2004; Burton *et al.*, 2008). Seventy-one percent of respondents at the TFFC agreed that it was important to be viewed as an active and productive farmer amongst their peers to maintain their status in the farming community with Glover (2011) pointing to the fact that a 'farmer's status is measured in the size and production levels of the farm' (p.7). The perceived loss of social insiderness and the subsequent distancing and/or hiatus from previously familiar social networks brought about by retirement is brought to light in the following interview extracts:

'It would certainly be a shock to the system not to be dairy farming anymore. It would be hard not to see the milk lorry driving into the yard in the mornings... and if I was no longer able to talk the same talk with other dairy farmers about milk yields, butterfat and protein and all that. I'd hate to be out of the loop so that's why I need to stay in touch and continue dairying with my son'. (Brian, aged 85)

'I feel very much part of the farming community here... ah there really is a great group of farmers in our area. We are also involved in a few Teagasc discussion groups around here. I think they are a great idea to thrash out ideas with farmers similar to yourself and also for the social aspect too of course. That's why it is important to stay actively involved in farming, otherwise you'd be cut adrift from these sorta things'. (John, aged 70)

These findings illustrate that it is almost impossible to untangle a farmer's everyday social interactions from everyday practices on the farm. Riley (2012) previously explained that the 'indivisibility of social and occupational spaces' within the farming community however, leaves farmers feeling isolated or like 'an outsider' within previously 'familiar and comfortable spaces' following retirement (p.769). The perceived loss of legitimate social insiderness brought about by retirement, is reported to be even more pronounced for those who are unable to draw on successors in connecting to these spaces (ibid). More specifically, Riley (2011) found that the commonality of owning and tending to animals are essential requirements to be a 'proper' part of livestock-related gatherings, such as auctions and agricultural shows. The lack of active and corporeal engagement with livestock

upon 'stepping aside' from the farm however, irrevocably changes the nature of these pre-existing settings of social inclusion (ibid). Conway *et al.* (2016) also noted that many older farmers believed that they would be seen or perceived differently by other farmers if they became a 'retired farmer'. The farm thus provides an arena in which the older generation can preserve their legitimacy as an active and productive farmer in society in later life.

4.3 Sense of nostalgia

A farmer's relationship with their farm extends beyond the physical setting and social milieu to represent a space and environment that has 'a temporal depth of meaning' (Rowles, 1983a, p.303). Eighty-two percent of farmers surveyed at the TFFC could trace their family's occupancy of the farm back two generations or more, a finding previously identified by Potter and Lobley (1996) who noted that farming tends to be 'the most hereditary of professions' (p.286). Furthermore, findings from the TFFC found that 87% of farmers surveyed think that 'it is important that their farm stays in their family's ownership in the future'. The temporal aspect of the farmer-farm based relationship is reflected in Rowles's (1983a) notion of autobiographical insiderness. Often unspoken and taken for granted, autobiographical insiderness is developed through acquisition of place-associated memories of significant life experiences, relationships and events in one's personal history (Rowles, 1993) which offers 'a sense of familiarity, connection and self-identity' in old age (Riley, 2012, p.764). Interviews reveal that the ancestral lineage of the farm, passed down through generations, provide farmers with an ingrained sense of autobiographical insiderness as custodians of their family's land in its present history:

'I inherited the place here from my father, just like he did from his father before. You are tied into a long family history when you are brought up on a farm you see. But I am only a spoke in the wheel of this farm's story, I am only a caretaker, so I hope to hand it over to my son one day and fingers crossed it stays in the family forever more after that'. (David, aged 70)

Price and Conn (2012) explain that farmers have 'a desire to maintain the farm in the family as a result of feelings of responsibility to past generations' (p.100). The farm therefore is not just a piece of land or a workplace (Burton, 2004), but rather 'the physical manifestation of generations of knowledge; knowledge developed and used over time' (Gill, 2013, p.79) by both the farmer themselves and by those who have lived and worked there before (Glover, 2011). The inherent desire not to keep the farm in the family is evident in findings from the FARMTRANSFERS survey which found that only 4% of respondent's 'desired succession and inheritance outcome' was to 'sell the farm to divide assets equally'. Irish farmer's profound historical connection to their land is aptly illustrated in the following extract taken from world-renowned author and playwright John B. Keane's play in 1965 entitled 'The Field': 'I watched this field for forty years and my father before me watched it for forty more. I know every rib of grass and every thistle and every whitethorn bush that bounds it'.

This captivating portrait of the deeply embedded attachment to farmland in rural Ireland in the mid-20th century, remains relevant to this day (Banovic, et al., 2015), with less than 1% of the total land area in the Republic of Ireland put on the open market annually (Hennessy, 2006; Irish Farmers Journal, 2012). Findings from the TFFC questionnaire confirm such a bond, with 88% respondents agreeing that they 'have an emotional/sentimental attachment to their land and animals'. More specifically, interview conversations reveal the nature of such intricate relationships:

'You form an attachment to the animals in the sense that you know how to live with every single one of them, they all have their own temperament and personality you see. I know the one's that will come to the gate first when they see me coming and I'd be able to tell straight away if any of them were sick or off form... so you see I need to check on my stock every day, every single day without exception. I'd be lost without them and they wouldn't survive without me, it's as simple as that'. (Luke, aged 69)

'I can still remember the dairy cows that we had when I was 6 or 7 years of age... I can remember them all dripping milk as they walked into the old parlour we had on the farm. ... We had a couple of Kerrys, a few Shorthorns, three Ayrshires, oh and a couple of Jerseys for the butter fat, so there was a good mix of breeds there. I remember them all, fond memories indeed... those very cows are the foundation of the fantastic wee herd we have on our farm today'. (Brian, aged 85)

The level of emotional attachment that farmers place on their farm and animals was previously brought to light by Glover (2010) who highlighted the extremely distressing experiences of farmers who had lost their entire dairy herds in the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease crisis. Riley (2011) explains that a dairy herd not only acts 'as biographical markers through which farmers may narrate not only their own life' (p.25) but it also represents an embodiment of the farm history, 'with the efforts and achievements of several generations inscribed upon them' (p.21). Similarly, Gray (1998) pointed to how sheep farmers in the Scottish Borders invested considerable time establishing flocks whose 'characteristics embody the natural qualities of the ground on which they graze' (p.351) through decades of selective breeding on their farm. Consequently, such distinctive breeding skills and practices define the personhood and lifetime's work of the farmer (ibid), which in turn, adds further to their personal accumulation of symbolic capital (Conway et al., 2016). Eighty-seven percent of questionnaire respondents at the TFFC agree that the farm represents years of hard work and what they have managed to achieve over their lifetime. Interviews reveal that the farm is a central site of autobiographical insideness as it represents a mosaic of the farmer's achievements as well as being a landscape of memories:

'Myself and my wife have been farming here for the last 34 years. We came from very humble beginnings and we make a lot of strides here through the years. We take pride in the fact that we have built slatted sheds, reclaimed land, picked stones, moved ditches, put in

Exploring the Irish farmer-farm relationship in later life fences, dug out roadways and established a good herd of cows. We have left our mark on the farm, just like my own father and mother did'. (Ian, aged 67)

Riley (2012) previously noted the 'emotional challenge of 'ending the line there' (p.774). This is especially the case when a successor is not in situ to take over the farm (ibid). Research findings indicate that the deep-seated sense of autobiographical attachment older farmers have with their farms can override and stifle various collaborative farming policy efforts aiming to facilitate land mobility from one generation to the next. This reluctance to 'let go' and/or alter the status quo of the farm is explained by Ingram and Kirwan (2011) who explain that the older generation are 'clearly attached to their farms, having put a lot of effort and investment over the years into building up the 'business' (p.295) and are therefore reluctant to 'let go' and/or alter the status quo of the farm:

'Unfortunately, we have no one to take over from us though so we will be looking to lease out some of the land soon. But I would hate for someone to come in and mess it all up. Oh that would be a huge disappointment, so we will be having a damn good look at the way the person who wants to lease our land looks after their farm first before we'd even consider leasing it to them'. (Ian, aged 67)

Ambivalence towards the succession process is also evident in the U.S.A., with programmes encouraging farm transfer reporting that they have 'approximately 20 beginning farmers for every existing farmer' (Whitehead et al., 2012, p.216). Price and Conn (2012) explain however that there is 'something about growing up on the farm that leads farmers to often imbue a sense of pride of being born to farm, a sense of destiny, of it being in their blood and this is clearly hard to pull away from' (p.105).

5. Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the complex farmer-farm relationships in later life. As the average age of the farming population is increasing worldwide, this investigation is very timely. The significant contribution of this paper to current needs and priorities within policy and research lies in its empirical insights, which demonstrate the appropriateness of utilizing the three dimensions of Rowles's (1983a) concept of insideness; physical, social and autobiographical, in bringing into focus the level of attachment older farmers place on their farms, and how such a bond can stifle the necessary hand over of the farm business to the next generation.

The prominent themes of rooted in place, legitimate connectedness and a sense of nostalgia, that emerge from the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, illustrate that farming is more than an economic activity. The so-called 'soft issues' i.e. the emotional issues, identified in this research, are the issues that distort and dominate the older generation's decisions on the future trajectory of the farm. Such issues have resulted in intractable challenges for succession and retirement policy

over the past forty years. These really are the 'hard issues'. As every farmer and farm is somewhat unique, this study acknowledges that there are no uniform or easily prescribed solutions to resolving this complex conundrum. However, we do advocate that family farm policy makers and practitioners re-examine their dominant focus on economic-based incentives and become more aware and knowledgeable of the intrinsic farmer-farm relationship identified in this study. This we argue will be crucial when reforming and developing future initiatives and strategies that seek to encourage the transfer of farm process by rightly considering interventions that maintain the quality of life of those concerned. Conway *et al.* (2016) previously noted the development of strategies 'concerning the human dynamics of family farm transfer (had) the potential to greatly ease the stresses of the process' (p.174). More fundamentally still, we follow Conway *et al.* (2017) in recommending that a concerted effort is made to provide extension advisory specialists on the ground with supplementary training in 'facilitation/communication' skills, in addition to their current 'technical' orientation. Such an understanding of the intrinsic link to farm attachment in old age will particularly equip these professionals with the necessary credibility, skill and reverence needed to empathise with elderly farmers and their individual needs.

On a related aspect, and while not central to what this particular study has focused on, is the issue of occupational health and safety on the farm. The insight into the senior generation's deeply-embedded sense of insideness towards their respective farms developed during this research suggests that there is much to be learned from the farmer-farm relationship that would benefit this very significant contemporary challenge. Farming is reported to be one of the most hazardous occupations in terms of the incidence and seriousness of accidental injuries (Glasscock, *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, agriculture exhibits disproportionately high fatality rates, when compared to other sectors (*ibid*). The general satisfaction and well-being that the older generation of the farming community attribute to the labour-intensive demands of working on the farm in later life, appears to be part of the farming psyche. An insight into the intrinsic link to farm attachment in old age and the importance attributed to the habitual routines within the farm setting, will provide the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) and member organisations of the HSA Farm Safety Partnership Advisory committee in the Republic of Ireland with an invaluable understanding of the various actions taken by (or should be taken by) older farmers to handle age-related physical limitations and barriers on their farms. This knowledge will aid in the development of an effective health and safety service tailored specifically to the needs of older farmers.

More fundamentally, this study recommends is the establishment of a national voluntary organisation that specifically represents the needs of the senior generation of the farming community in rural areas, equivalent to that of younger people in rural Ireland i.e. Macra na Feirme (see footnote 2). There are no such bodies or services currently in existence in the Republic of Ireland. Suited to the older generation's own interests and needs identified in this research, (and by Conway *et al.*, 2016), such a voluntary organisation, funded annually by the Government and through membership, would provide

the older generation with a fulcrum around which they can remain embedded 'inside' their farms and social circles in later life. A significant obstacle to the inter-generational farm transfer process is the rigid inflexibility of the occupational role, where older farmers wish to remain 'rooted in place' on the farm and in many cases, have developed few interests outside of farming, due to the 'dense intertwining of occupational and social spaces' within the farming community (Riley, 2012, p.769). A nationwide voluntary organisation, with a network of clubs in every county across the country, would allow older farmers to integrate within the social fabric of a local age peer group, whilst also providing them with opportunities to develop a pattern of farming activities suited to advancing age. This would contribute to their overall sense of insideness, and, therefore, sense of self-worth, amidst the gradual diminishment of their physical capacities on the farm in later life. Collaborating with their younger counterparts in Macra na Feirme on various campaigns and activities would also allow the senior generation to retain a sense of purpose and value in old age. Similar to Macra na Feirme, this body for older farmers, with their added wealth of experience, would act as a social partner farm organisation together with the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) for example, that would allow this generation to have regular access to government ministers and senior civil servants, thus providing them with a voice to raise issues of concern. Indeed, such a group could be invaluable with regard to the development of future farm transfer strategies that would truly be cognisant of the human side of the process of intergenerational renewal. An established organisation for older farmers would also allow this sector of society to have a representative on important committees such as the Board of Teagasc, similar to their younger counterparts.

Finally, although this study is limited to the Republic of Ireland, and findings may be dependent on the cultural and institutional milieu that govern Irish farm transfers, its association with the International FARM-TRANSFERS project, provides a solid database upon which future research can begin to build, and general conclusions can be based. Indeed, such is the complexity of the farmer and farming traditions that a multi-layered picture comparing farmer's succession and retirement plans, with patterns obtained from other participating countries and states in the U.S.A. would be invaluable. As Hofstede (1984) points out 'culture determines the identity of a human group in the same way as personality determines the identity of an individual' (p.22). Difficulties around intergenerational family farm transfer and an ageing farming population are not unique to any one country but are recognised at all levels, national, European Union and beyond. Consequently, this study, while reflecting the Irish experience, will begin a much broader international conversation on farmers, their place, view, concerns and challenges in the context of the future prosperity of the agricultural sector and ultimately the future sustainability of rural families, communities and environments on which we all depend. Further involvement in the International FARMTRANSFERS project will also ensure the internationalisation of research findings to key stakeholders outside of academia. In summation, a greater focus on the farmer-farm relationship has the potential to finally unite farm transfer policy efforts with the mind-set of its targeted audience, after decades of disconnect.

Footnote

1. The survey was undertaken within a memorandum of understanding between Dr Shane Francis Conway, Postdoctoral Researcher at NUI Galway, Anne Kinsella, Senior Research Officer at the Teagasc Agricultural Economics and Farms Surveys Department and the International FARMTRANSFERS project's Co-Directors, Professor Matt Lobley, at the Centre for Rural Policy Research, University of Exeter, United Kingdom and John R. Baker, Attorney at Law at the Beginning Farmer Centre, Iowa State University, U.S.A.

2. Macra na Feirme is a voluntary, rural youth organisation in the Republic of Ireland for people between the ages of 17 and 35. Founded in 1944, the organisation now has approximately 200 clubs in 31 regions around the country. One of the organisation's main aims is to help young farmers get established in farming and assist them through learning and skills development.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

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