



# Uncovering obstacles: The exercise of symbolic power in the complex arena of intergenerational family farm transfer



Shane Francis Conway <sup>a,\*</sup>, John McDonagh <sup>a</sup>, Maura Farrell <sup>a</sup>, Anne Kinsella <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Discipline of Geography, National University of Ireland, Galway, University Road, Galway, Ireland

<sup>b</sup> Teagasc, Agricultural Economics and Farms Surveys Department, Mellows Campus, Athenry, Co. Galway, Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

The older generation's reluctance to 'step aside' and retire to facilitate young farmers who want to establish a career in farming is a globally recognized feature of intergenerational family farm transfer. This is despite the array of financial enticements encouraging the process. Recent research carried out in the Republic of Ireland reveals that the prospect of such a transition places significant emotional stress on older farmers, leading many to abstain from retirement. Applying Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic power and violence as a theoretical framework, this paper presents a detailed analysis of the manner in which the older generation galvanize and sustain their managerial control and dominance as head of the family farm. This research employs a multi-method triangulation design, consisting of self-administered questionnaires in conjunction with complimentary Problem-Centred Interviews, to reveal the actions that have a hindering and deterring influence on the process. The prominent strategies of symbolic violence to emerge from the empirical data were the senior generation's efforts to reiterate their indispensability to the daily management and operation of the farm, the imposition of a mind-set of the disastrous consequences retirement would bring and unilateral acts of generosity. Additionally, farmers are found to hold contradictory and conflicting desires about farm transfer; even those who are in the process of or have already planned for succession resist 'fading into the background' and instead move to reassert their authority over the family farm. The paper concludes by suggesting that policy and professionals dealing with farm families must be cognisant of the pervasiveness of power relations embedded in the mentality of everyday farm life when facilitating discussions between old and young family members' objectives, goals and expectations for the farm.

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## 1. Introduction

The family farm is an enduring symbol of rurality, with many farmers able to trace their family's history back 'three generations or more' (Lobley and Baker, 2012, p.11). Maintaining family farm control and ownership is therefore central to many farm households (Gasson and Errington, 1993; Mishra and El-Osta, 2008; Glover, 2010), resulting in a deeply ingrained 'rural ideology' that prioritizes the process of handing over the farm within the family (Barclay et al., 2005; Lobley et al., 2010; Gill, 2013; Nuthall and Old, 2017). Furthermore, a longing to 'keep the name on the land' (Potter and Lobley, 1992; Price and Conn, 2012) has focused a 'clear recognition of the cyclical nature of inheritance and farming' (Gill,

2013, p.85). Farmers have their farms because of the actions of their ancestors; therefore believing in their responsibility to pass on what they inherited (ibid). Indeed, Potter and Lobley (1996) consider farming to be 'the most hereditary of professions' (P.286). Drawing on family farm transfer literature from the Republic of Ireland and further afield (Kimhi and Lopez, 1999; Foskey, 2005; Bika, 2007; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Barclay et al., 2012; Conway et al., 2016; Nuthall and Old, 2017), it is clear that in spite of the deep-rooted desire to keep the farm in the family however, there is considerable reluctance amongst the older generation towards relinquishing managerial duties and ownership to the next generation. Consequently, a significant proportion of farmers abstain from transferring the farm while alive; resulting in significant economic and sociocultural barriers for the younger generation interested in pursuing a career in farming. The lack of correspondence between the senior generation's readiness to step aside and the younger generation's inclination to take over, is also

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [s.conway9@nuigalway.ie](mailto:s.conway9@nuigalway.ie) (S.F. Conway).

seen as one of the reasons why the farming community consists of a farm population with a high age profile (Mishra and El-Osta, 2007; Hennessy and Rehman, 2007; Zagata and Sutherland, 2015).

Considerable research is dedicated towards trying to understand this fraught and complex conundrum, and how such issues can be prevented or resolved. Conway et al. (2016) identified the value of applying Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital in comprehending the human factors governing the behaviour patterns and attitudes of elderly farmers facing the 'twin processes' of succession and retirement. Using this concept, with associated characteristics of honour, prestige, position and status, it highlights that the decision-making process of the older farmer does not always adhere to the economic school of thought, owing to emotional ties to the farm and farming occupation. As the senior generation's symbolic capital appears to be 'founded not only on their past achievements but also on present production' (Conway et al., 2016, p.174), the potential loss of 'esteem, recognition, belief, credit and confidence of others' (Bourdieu, 2000, p.166), that may occur as a result of handing over responsibility of the farm to the next generation was discovered to be 'difficult to absorb for many older farmers' (Conway et al., 2016, p.173). The older generation were also found to resist the process because they revel in the socially recognized and approved authority attached to their hierarchical position as the 'boss farmer', from which symbolic power can be legitimately exercised (Swartz, 2013) and therefore, inevitably their ability to control and shape the events around them (Conway et al., 2016). As such power has potential repressive elements, this paper builds on a preliminary hypothesis made by Conway et al. (2016) that it may be the case that older farmers 'exploit their symbolic power as head of the household and farm', in an effort to galvanize and sustain their managerial control and ownership of the family farm (p.175). This research is particularly concerned with the way such power is exercised against the younger generation and reflects on whether it can be characterized as involving what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, to put it as simply as possible, is a non-physical mode of dominance, in which the ideas and values of a ruling cultural class (i.e. the older generation in this case) are imposed (often through subconscious means) onto the thoughts and perceptions of a dominated social group (i.e. the younger generation) in a covert manner to maintain and perpetuate structures of inequality and marginalization in the existing social order/societal hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1991; Colaguori, 2010; Anderson, 2013; Udasmoro, 2013). Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as 'soft' violence (Moi, 1991 p.1023), or as 'censored, euphemized, i.e., unrecognizable, socially recognized violence' (Bourdieu, 1977: 191). The invisible nature of symbolic violence as a mode of legitimate domination (Morgan and Björkert, 2006; Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016) has the potential to generate precarious, and often unintended, consequences that can displace the ambitions and long-term objectives of the younger generation by removing their agency and voice (Montesanti and Thurston, 2015; Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016).

In the Republic of Ireland, agricultural policy has explored various methods of financially stimulating and enticing intergenerational farm transfer over the past four decades, albeit very little change in attitude amongst the older generation towards the process has come about to date (Commins and Kelleher, 1973; Gillmor, 1999; Bika, 2007; Conway et al., 2016; Leonard et al., 2017). Conway et al. (2016) argue that while policy measures to alleviate concerns of an aging farming population and improve competitiveness of the agricultural sector are important, they are excessively preoccupied with economic enticements and have 'little or no regard' for the older farmer's emotional welfare (p.166). In particular, Conway et al. (2016) strongly criticised the eligibility requirements for farmers entering the most recent largely unsuccessful Early Retirement

Scheme for farmers (ERS 3) (June, 2007), which included 'Persons intending to retire under the scheme shall cease agricultural activity forever' (DAFM, 2007), arguing that this scheme was completely oblivious to the psyche of many older farmers. The thought of becoming a 'retiree' was identified as being particularly arduous for farmers who wish to remain 'recognised as an active and productive farmer in society', as it is seen to be central to their sense of self (Conway et al., 2016, p.174). In a similar way, Kirkpatrick's (2013) study in the USA also argued that 'in many cases the older farmer's 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). The limited uptake and marginal success of previous Early Retirement Schemes in the Republic of Ireland, in addition to the fact that entry into the agricultural sector is almost entirely by inheritance or purchasing highly inflated farmland (Hennessy and Rehman, 2007; Conway et al., 2016; Leonard et al., 2017), indicates that existing and future policies and schemes designed to incentivize and stimulate intergenerational farm transfer, such as farm partnerships, need to be rectified to encourage increased uptake and participation. Before confronting such issues however, it is first essential to expose the defence mechanisms and tactics employed by the older generation to avoid and deter the process from occurring, as these individuals ultimately have the power to decide whether the transition takes place or not, due to their substantial, lifelong cache of symbolic capital (Conway et al., 2016). This study explores this anomaly through the analytical lens of Bourdieu's conceptual triumvirate of symbolic capital, power, and the exercise of symbolic violence. Moi (1991) highlight how 'the powerful possessors of symbolic capital become the wielders of symbolic power, and thus of symbolic violence' (p.1022), enabling them to impose meanings as legitimate while concealing the arbitrary power relations that are the basis of its force (Bourdieu, 1977).

To investigate this further, family firm literature pertaining to the manner in which the senior family business leader and owner, hereafter referred to as the incumbent, galvanize their controlling position and dominance as head of the firm (e.g. Lansberg, 1988; Handler, 1994; Sharma et al., 2001; Kets de Vries, 2003; Palliam et al., 2011) will be drawn on. Family business research suggests that the responsibility for directing succession planning lies heavily on the support of the incumbent (Christensen, 1953; Kelly et al., 2000), who appears to have 'the power to shape the succession process for better or ill' (Sharma et al., 2001, p. 31). This paper, in particular, draws on Lansberg's (1988) theoretical hypotheses of resistance toward succession planning in the family business from the perspective of the incumbent. According to Lansberg's theory, resistance or at best ambivalence to the succession process can be explained by the understanding that succession decisions tend to be emotionally loaded. In many cases the older generation experience difficulties actively engaging in or mobilising the process and as a result often exert strong pressures to avoid the emotion-laden issues of transferring the family business to the next generation (ibid). There is however a lack of in-depth research that investigates these issues in relation to the family farm business, resulting in a knowledge void of the micro-politics and hierarchical power dynamics at play within family farm households. The sheer number of family farms, their aggregate impact on the agri-food industry, and the potential economic and social losses that may occur as a consequence of the senior generation's widely reported unwillingness to engage in intergenerational family farm transfer (Foskey, 2005; Bika, 2007; Lobley et al., 2010; Conway et al., 2016), befit us to delve deeper into the mind-set and mannerism of older farmers. Drawing on two previously disparate literature (transferring the family firm and family farm) and applying Bourdieu's perspective on power as a theoretical framework, this paper presents an

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