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Enriching the multi-level perspective by better understanding agency and challenges associated with interactions across system boundaries. The case of care farming in the Netherlands: Multifunctional agriculture meets health care

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ABSTRACT

The multi-level perspective (MLP) is broadly and successfully used as a framework for understanding transitions. However several aspects need more attention like agency, interactions across system boundaries and multi-regime interactions. We used our detailed and contextualized knowledge and analysis of the developing care farming sector in the Netherlands to increase our understanding of the role of agency and challenges and successful strategies of actors associated with interactions across system boundaries. We used entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship and social movement theory to better understand agency in MLP. Connecting separated sectors, overcoming lack of legitimacy, lack of embeddedness and dealing with different logics were challenges associated with the care farm innovation that transcends system boundaries. Actors with a dual identity and combining entrepreneurial and institutional behavior and actors connecting with embedded actors with corresponding logics were important in overcoming these challenges.

1. Introduction

Care farming, green care or social farming, a fast growing sector across Europe (Hassink and Van Dijk, 2006; DiIacovo & O'Connor, 2009), is an innovative practice where agricultural production is being combined with health and social services (Hassink and Van Dijk, 2006). It is an innovation at the crossroads of agriculture and health care, where the agricultural sector is actively involved in providing care for different client groups. Clients, or participants in the vocabulary of care farmers, are involved in agricultural production. Care farms offer day care, supported workplaces and/or residential places for clients with a variety of disabilities (Elings and Hassink, 2008). Care farming is emerging in many European countries due to the increasing focus on different aspects of multifunctional agriculture, as well as concerns about public health expenditure and the efficacy of social services (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009). Care farming has developed between and on top of two existing sectors, agriculture and health care. It can be understood as re-connecting two sectors that had become disconnected through modernization.

Three discourses have been suggested in the European arena relating to the multi-functionality of agriculture, public health and social inclusion (Dessein et al., 2013). Multi-functionality is the main discourse in the Netherlands, Flanders and Norway, where care farming is positioned in the agricultural sector, takes place mainly on private family farms and is considered as an additional source of farm income (Hassink et al., 2007).

In this paper we focus on the development of care farming in the Netherlands where care farming is an interesting example of multi-functional agriculture. Care farming has developed between and on top of two existing sectors, agriculture and health care. It can be understood as re-connecting two sectors that had become disconnected through modernization, although traditionally there were always important connections. During the Middle Ages, many hospitals and monasteries looking after the sick had gardens as an adjunct to recuperation and healing (Frumkin, 2001). In the village of Geel in Flanders, care was provided in a rural agricultural setting since the 13th century (Roosens and van de Walle, 2007). However, since the beginning of the 20th century, and especially since World War II, agriculture and health care largely dissected, mainly due to the processes of urbanization and intensification, rationalization and specialization in agriculture and

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medicalization, specialization and professionalization in health care (Schuitmaker, 2012). In this process, agriculture and health care, while each achieving significant successes in their respective areas, had drifted apart (Farla et al., 2012).

Most care farms were initiated by male or female farmers. They faced the challenge of having to enter the care sector, establishing themselves as caregivers and gaining access to care budgets. Literature on multifunctional agriculture shows that starting new non-farming businesses is challenging for farmers and many of them feel not capable or comfortable leaving the farm and crossing the boundary between agriculture and another sector (Seuneke et al., 2013). Most farms are family owned and managed, and passed on from parents to their sons and daughters, which means that the cycle of family life, culture, logics and routines plays an important role in the development of on-farm multi-functionality (Jervell, 2011). After years of parental production-oriented thought and action, successors are likely to face challenges when they try to push the farm towards a stronger degree of multi-functionality (Wilson, 2008). In addition, traditional farming organizations are not well prepared to help farmers in this boundary-crossing task (Clark, 2009). The most pressing challenges identified in meetings with the main stakeholders in the care farming sector were bridging the gap between the agricultural and care sector and becoming embedded in the care sector, developing sustainable financing structures, and developing professional organizations and legitimacy (Blom and Hassink, 2008).

In light of these challenges, it is remarkable to see that the care farming sector in the Netherlands has developed so rapidly. The aim of previous studies was to find out how it was possible that this new sector could develop so quickly in the Netherlands (Hassink et al., 2013, 2015, Hassink et al., 2016a,b; Hassink et al., 2012, 2014, Hassink et al., 2016a,b). Transition theory and the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) were a useful framework in better understanding the developments of this new sector not only in the Netherlands (Hassink et al., 2014) but also in Italy (Dellolio et al., 2017) The aim of this paper is to explore whether our detailed information of the development of the care farming sector is helpful to enrich the MLP. In the next section, we will give a first, rough account, using the MLP from transition studies as the main explanatory framework. We will then successively discuss some issues that can use a more specific explanation, drawing on other concepts from a variety of studies. In doing so, we will articulate the implied enrichment of the MLP.

1.1. Theoretical context and scientific objectives

The key challenge for developing the care farming sector is to bridge the gap between two sectors that have drifted apart, developing legitimacy, professional organizations and sustainable financing structures for the care services that care farmers are providing (Blom and Hassink, 2008). More specifically, care farming practitioners are often newcomers to one sector, while being outliers in their 'home sector', which leads to specific challenges of overcoming a lack of legitimacy and problems in finding financial and knowledge resources. These problems are common to so-called system innovations (Hekkert et al., 2007), i.e. innovations that involve both changes in practices and changes in the structures in which they are embedded.

In the field of transition studies, the MLP has been proposed as a broad framework for understanding the challenges and dynamics of such systemic changes. MLP captures the essence of transitions as a process of mutually reinforcing changes at three levels: niche innovations, socio-technological regimes and socio-technological landscape (Geels and Schot, 2007). It is compatible with the basic idea from social theory in which agency (intentions and behavior of actors) and structure (rules, regulations, routines at regime level) shape each other under the influence of exogenous developments (Giddens, 1984; Grin, 2006). The landscape level forms a broad exogenous environment that is beyond the direct influence of regime and niche actors. Landscape pressures can build gradually or appear suddenly and can trigger changes in logics and practices at regime level (Geels and Schot, 2010). Relevant changes at landscape level that put pressure on the care and agricultural regimes are the empowerment of clients, liberalization and the increasing concern for animal welfare, landscape and the environment (Hassink et al., 2014). The regime refers to dominant practices and the shared rules, resources and routines on which they draw.' The rules and routines of socio-technical regimes account for stability. Normal innovations draw on these structural elements and typically reproduce dominant practices. Niches form the micro-level where radical innovations emerge, which are often protected in the starting phase from mainstream market selection by dedicated actors (Schot, 1998). Care farming can be seen as a niche innovation at the cross roads of agriculture and health care. Care farms are hybrid practices that relate to both agricultural and care regimes.

Complex interactions can lead to different transition patterns and transition pathways (Grin, 2010). Care farming is an example of an inter-system pathway, where formerly de-aligned care and agricultural regimes are re-aligned. System innovations like care farming are more radical than normal innovations, in that they do not just reproduce incumbent practices, and therefore are not (entirely) served by regime structures or, even worse, experience barriers resulting from institutional inheritance' (Healey, 1997), 'structural inertia' (Linder and Peters, 1995, p. 133) and embedded agency (Seo and Creed, 2002; Garud et al., 2007). Generally speaking, such more radical innovations, that demand structural change, initially develop in niches, where they are less exposed to the adverse influences of the incumbent regime, and may find (temporary) rules and resources on which they may draw. We can see the levels of the MLP as different levels of structuration. (Grin, 2006, 2008; Geels and Schot, 2010). Seeing the MLP from the wider perspective of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), agents will be seen as knowledgeable, reflexive and purposeful and can alter structures in which they move (Smith, 2007). Especially when understood in this way, the multi-level perspective can be helpful in understanding interactions between initiators' agency and existing structures in the health care and agricultural regime, and 'exogenous' developments in society and the change in structures through a niche innovation like care farming.

While the MLP has been widely and successfully used as a framework for understanding and governance of transitions (Geels and Schot, 2007) several aspects are not well understood or need more attention. It has been argued that more attention should be given to agency; niche actors who push for niche innovations and regime changes (e.g. Smith et al., 2005; Genus and Coles, 2008). In addition, it has been acknowledged that not enough attention has been paid to interactions across system boundaries and multi-regime interactions (Raven and Verbong, 2009; Sutherland and Zagata, 2015) and that taking on board sustainable issues in fields like health care instead of the classic clean-tech topics in energy will lead to valuable insights (Markard et al., 2012). Studies so far suggest that this may be beneficial when a niche innovation can be linked as a solution to multiple regimes (Raven and Verbong, 2007), but problematic when the objectives of the regimes require conflicting actions or create additional problems and uncertainties (Schot and Geels, 2008). The case of the care farming sector may contribute to these debates, as it may help uncover the role of agency in innovations that transcend system boundaries.

To develop our understanding of such cross-sectoral agency (actions to connect different sectors) further, the notion of entrepreneurship may be of help. In fact, literature on multifunctional agricultural has identified the need for enhancement of entrepreneurship to start new non-farming businesses (Seuneke et al., 2013). Therefore, we take entrepreneurship to enrich agency in MLP to analyze behavior of initiators of care farms. Our focus is on the opportunity-based conceptualization of entrepreneurship (Shane & Venkatamaran, 2000). It is about entrepreneurial individuals seizing lucrative opportunities, and involves opportunity identification and exploitation and entrepreneurial