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Further Reading:

Conway, S.F., McDonagh, J., Farrell, M. and Kinsella, A. (2021) Going Against the Grain: Unravelling the Habitus of Older Farmers to Help Facilitate Generational Renewal in Agriculture, *Sociologia Ruralis*
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Read More About:

The [Environment, Development, and Sustainability](#) cluster within the Whitaker Institute for Innovation and Societal Change.

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Aligning the Farming Habitus with Generational Renewal in Agriculture Policy

Limited uptake of financial incentives, designed to confront global trends of an ageing farming population and low levels of land mobility (i.e. transfer of land from one farmer to another, or from one generation to the next), reveal resistance or at best ambivalence, amongst farmers towards altering existing farm management and ownership structures in later life. This study draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (i.e. 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) to help uncover the senior generation's deeply embedded views towards succession and retirement, and the changes they perceive will occur upon their engagement in the process.

Research Findings

Findings from a series of Problem-Centred Interviews (n=19), used in conjunction with a complimentary Teagasc National Land Use Farm survey (n=236), reveal that the attitudes and behaviour required to 'step aside' and retire from farming, not only 'go against the grain' of the older farmers' habitus, appearing to be instinctively 'wrong', they also appear incompatible with what is necessary to earn recognition as a 'good farmer'. This latter consequence is due to farmer's ingrained beliefs about the lack of possibilities to present themselves as an active, hard-working, dedicated farmer in the farming community upon doing so. Such resistance towards succession and hesitancy to embrace change is a major concern, as it results in the younger generation having significant difficulties obtaining sufficient resources and capital to get established in farming, a situation largely unchanged in the Republic of Ireland since pioneering research was carried out in this area by Commins (1973).

Policy Implications

The critical forces identified in this research, which interfere with, and in many cases prevent generational renewal in agriculture from occurring, indicates that a cultural shift in thinking about succession must be confronted at an earlier life stage in order to inculcate a new farming habitus that will help abate the exiting ambivalence towards this taboo topic. This study recommends that the introduction of a 'Farm Succession Planning' module, as part of the necessary curriculum to obtain a qualification in agriculture at college level, is one way in which the traditional ground-rules of intergenerational farm transfer can be influenced over time to bring about much needed change in the collective behaviours, attitudes and perceptions amongst members of the farming community towards the process. As an individual's habitus is generally acquired through a gradual process of inculcation in which experiences during one's younger years are particularly important, this proposed addition to the agricultural curriculum, with a particular focus on coursework and assignments geared towards stimulating open lines of intergenerational communication within farm households regarding the future trajectory of the farm, can potentially help 'normalise' succession planning within the farming community and in turn, set in motion a long-term perception and acceptance that it is 'the right thing to do' in order to bring about generational renewal in agriculture.