

## **Intergenerational Family Farm Transfer: An Insight into the Human Side**

Shane Conway<sup>1</sup>, John McDonagh<sup>1</sup>, Maura Farrell<sup>1</sup>, Anne Kinsella<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Discipline of Geography, National University of Ireland, Galway, University Road,  
Galway, Ireland

<sup>2</sup>Teagasc Agricultural Economics and Farms Surveys Department, Mellows Campus, Athenry,  
Co. Galway, Ireland

Corresponding Author Email Address: [s.conway9@nuigalway.ie](mailto:s.conway9@nuigalway.ie)

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### **Abstract**

Similar to what is occurring on a global scale, Irish agriculture is populated by an older generation of farmers. Consequently, intergenerational family farm transfer is increasingly viewed as crucial to the survival, continuity and future sustainability of the family farm and agricultural sector. A review of existing research highlights how financial incentives that encourage succession and retirement from farming have stimulated little change in the behavioural intentions and attitudes amongst elderly farmers. This paper sets aside economic enticements and presents an insightful, nuanced analysis of the human factors that influence the process of transferring the family farm from the perspective of the senior generation. This research employs a multi-method triangulation design, consisting of self-administered questionnaires in conjunction with complimentary Problem-Centred Interviews, to acquire data on the complex emotions involved in the process. The prominent themes to emerge from the empirical data are farmer's concerns regarding potential loss of identity, status and control upon transferring management and ownership of the family farm and retiring. There is also a cultural expectation within the farming community that 'farmers don't retire'. The paper concludes by suggesting that future policies and programmes encouraging family farm transfer must develop effective strategies that addresses the emotional well-being of elderly farmers.

### **Keywords**

Family Farming, Succession, Retirement, Farm Viability, Rural Sustainability

## 1. Introduction

Interest in intergenerational family farm transfer and its impact on the farming economy has grown considerably amid concerns about the sustainability of an ageing farming population (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011). Global 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. In Europe, 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). 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). This 'greying' of the agricultural community, will see the number of aging farmers facing farm transfer accelerate in the coming decades (Mishra and El-Osta, 2007), a situation meriting serious and timely investigation.

Intergenerational farm transfer is a multifaceted process that encompasses three distinct but interrelated processes: succession, inheritance and retirement (Gasson and Errington, 1993). Succession is viewed as managerial control which is gradually relinquished; retirement is associated with the owner withdrawing from active participation in the business of the farm, while inheritance is the final stage when all of the business assets are legally transferred to the successor (Errington, 2002). Whilst conceptually separate, these processes are linked, with succession seen as the 'mirror image' of retirement; as the new generation succeeds, the old generation retires (Gasson and Errington, 1993; Errington and Lobley 2002; Uchiyama et al., 2008, Lobley, 2010). The terms 'succession' and 'retirement' will thus be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Intergenerational family farm transfer is a complex and highly topical issue both in terms of society and farm sustainability. A low rate of entry into farming will lead to fewer numbers of farmers and may have profound implications for the industry, the countryside, land use and the broader sustainability of rural communities (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Goeller, 2012). Equally, it has been recognised that the 'twin process' of succession and retirement if not addressed adequately can be a period of considerable stress, both emotionally and financially, for family farm households (Burton and Walford, 2005). More broadly, many investigations of intergenerational family farm transfer have limited attention to the lack of successors willing to take over, despite the well documented deep-rooted reluctance and resistance by elderly farmers from Ireland and further afield to transfer managerial duties to younger generations and retire from farming (Gasson and Errington, 1993; Kimhi and Lopez, 1997; Gillmor, 1999; Defra, 2002; Foskey, 2005; Vare, 2006; Bika, 2007; Calus et al., 2008; Lobley et al., 2010; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Barclay et al., 2012, Bogue, 2013; NRN, 2013). The prevailing reason for an aging farming population from census to census is also reported to be the lack of 'new blood' entering the industry (ADAS, 2004; Hennessy and Rehman, 2007; DGIP, 2012; Zagata and Lošťák, 2014). However, despite changes in agricultural support regimes, challenging economic environments and socio-cultural changes in farming, the upsurge in demand from young people for education and training in agriculture in the Republic of Ireland and beyond provides contradictory evidence and indicates a renewed interest in pursuing farming as a career (Teagasc, 2011; Whitehead et al., 2012; Baker, 2012). Therefore, while the successor is undoubtedly a crucial player in the succession and retirement planning process, it is crucial to realise that the successor is not alone in resisting the process. In many cases the older generation also experience difficulties actively engaging in or mobilising the process and as a result often exerts strong pressures to avoid

the emotion-laden issues of succession and retirement. A particular focus of this paper therefore centres upon the notion that older farmer's emotions are not given due consideration (Kirkpatrick, 2013) when discussing the interrelated processes of intergenerational family farm transfer: succession, inheritance and retirement.

Undue emphasis on economic aspects of intergenerational family farm transfer has led to an overly simplified view of the factors influencing the decision-making process. Agricultural policy, designed to assist older farmers to exit farming focuses on encouraging those generating low returns to retire from the industry but these are clearly not designed to deal with the specific issues facing ageing farmers (Rogers et al., 2013). This human dynamic is disregarded with little value placed on the notion that farming is not just a job or something driven by a desire to make money; it is a passion and a lifestyle (ibid). A byzantine mix, whereby the already problematic economic business dimension is further complicated by a more complex emotional aspect. There is clear lack of understanding of the views of elderly farmers, on their concerns, fears, needs and future plans. It is naïve therefore of policy makers and practitioners not to consider the potent mass of emotional and psychological values attached to the farming occupation for older farmers 'beyond the economic' (Pile, 1990, p. 147).

This paper sets aside financial enticements and presents a more nuanced analysis of the factors that influence the unwillingness and reluctance amongst older farmers towards relinquishing management and ownership of the family farm and ultimately begin the process of their retirement (Gillmor, 1999; Bika, 2007; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011). Instead of focusing on the 'mechanics' of family farm transfer (Price and Conn, 2012), we aim to dissect the role that emotional ties to the farm and farming occupation play on decision-making processes surrounding farm succession and retirement from the older farmer's perspective. Consequently, this paper has global relevance and will be of particular interest to countries like the Republic of Ireland where the age profile of the farming community and the rate of succession and retirement have been matters of concern and unease for decades (Commins, 1973; Commins and Kelleher 1973; Gilmore, 1999; Bogue, 2013; NRN, 2013). The next section reviews the relevant family farm transfer literature, followed by a summary of the methodology employed in the research. Research findings are then discussed with the latter part of the paper drawing some exploratory conclusions.

## **2. 'Greying' of the Farming Population**

The farming community increasingly consists of a farm population with a high age profile. This 'greying' of the farming population has major implications for government policy (Rogers et al., 2013) raising concerns about the need to reinvigorate the industry with new, or at the very least fresh, blood, alongside arguments that an elderly farming population is likely to be less competitive in the current market place because they are slower to adopt new innovative agricultural technologies (Ingram and Kirwan, 2011). In the Republic of Ireland for example, it is argued that significant changes and modifications to boost the competitiveness and production efficiency of Irish agriculture through land mobility (i.e. transfer of land from one farmer to another, or from one generation to the next) and structural change are required in order to realise ambitious growth targets set out in Food Harvest 2020 (DAFF 2010; Läßle and Hennessy 2012; Bogue, 2013; NRN 2013). Specifically, not unlike elsewhere in the world, there have been calls for deterrents

obstructing the passage of farmland from the older to younger generation of farmers to be overcome as the intergenerational transfer of the family farm is viewed as crucial for future prosperity in the farming industry (Connolly, 2009). In the Republic of Ireland for however, entry to farming through channels other than inheritance is rare due to both the limited availability and the high cost of land (Hennessy and Rehman, 2007). It is estimated that only 0.3% of the total land area in Ireland was put on the market in 2011 (Irish Farmer's Journal, 2012). A recent report on 'Land Mobility and Succession in Ireland' claims the lack of land mobility currently experienced is stifling agricultural growth and development by preventing young 'enthusiastic' farmers gaining access to productive assets (Bogue, 2013). In an effort to alleviate concerns of an aging farming population and improve competitiveness, the Irish policy environment has explored various methods of stimulating and enticing intergenerational family farm transfer for some time. These included several well-documented financial incentives which encouraged early retirement from farming, albeit very little change in attitudes towards intergenerational transfer of the farm has come about (Ryan, 1995, Gillmor, 1999; Bika, 2007). Early retirement schemes have had only marginal success in restructuring the farming sector. Ryan (1995) suggested weak participation was the result of several factors including low retirement benefits and a cultural resistance to leave farming. Other attempts included a concerted effort to ensure the most tax efficient means of transferring ownership and wealth of farms (Meehan, 2012), which again yielded nothing like the required result. In fact, despite these financial incentives, reluctance of older farmers to exit or retire from the farming sector to facilitate young farmers who have a desire to start up persists.

The acceptability of retirement schemes from farming is likely to be a personal dilemma for many elderly farmers particularly as they adjust to a major change in their occupational role (Commins, 1973; Gillmor 1999). Understanding when to relinquish control from the family farm can be difficult to recognise for many farmers in that few other businesses generate the emotional connections that farming does (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Rogers et al., 2013). Farming life throughout the world is characterised by the almost inseparable intimate integration of home, work, memories and family tradition (Barclay et al., 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Uchiyama and Whitehead, 2012). In fact, Lobley et al. (2004) and previously Gillmor (1977; 1999) pointed to distinctive characteristics of farmers, in that they tend to have deep rooted emotional attachment to the key business assets they own, such as particular tracts of land or animals, thereby increasing their reluctance to relinquish ownership and leave farming. Kirkpatrick (2013) argues that in many cases the older farmer's sense of place and purpose attached to the family farm supersedes economic imperatives encouraging the transfer of the family farm to the next generation. This indicates the overwhelming significance of lifestyle over profit (Price and Conn 2012). Recent research conducted in the Republic of Ireland, touched on this, alluding to the fact that 'apart from the economic driver of payments retaining elderly farmers on land, there are also psychological drivers involved' and 'addressing the issue of low levels of mobility must also take cognisance of these psychological barriers' (NRN, 2013, p. 6). This research came 40 years after Commins (1973) first stressed that retirement policy, 'with economic objectives, should not ignore possible social consequences or wider issues of human welfare' (p. 45). However, to date, such recommendations have largely been ignored, resulting in the formulation and implementation of largely unsuccessful farm transfer policy strategies, such as Early Retirement Schemes, which have little or no regard for elderly farmer's emotions. It is in probing these issues further that this paper now turns.

#### **4. Methodology**

This research employed a multi-method triangulation design in an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the emotional factors that influence the process of transferring the family farm business from the perspective of the senior generation. Cohen and Manion (1986) define triangulation as an 'attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint' (p. 254). For the purpose of this study triangulation was assured using a collection of both quantitative and qualitative data through the use of self-administered questionnaires in conjunction with complimentary Problem-Centred Interviews.

A detailed survey was initially undertaken with farmers in attendance at a series of 'Transferring the Family Farm' clinics hosted by Teagasc, the agriculture and food development authority in Ireland to investigate the behavioural intentions and attitudes of older farmers towards succession and retirement from farming. These clinics facilitated by Teagasc, took place at 11 locations throughout the Republic of Ireland in September and October 2014, with local solicitors, accountants and other experts also in attendance for one to one meetings with attendees. These events also provided an ideal opportunity to recruit participants located throughout the Republic of Ireland for interview at the second phase of data collection. Representatives from each of Teagasc's advisory service regional units organised and participated in these clinics (delivered free of charge) following a series of seminars and a successful pilot event in February 2014. As part of Teagasc's campaign to advertise and promote these 'Transferring the Family Farm' clinics, invitations were sent out to each of their 43,000 farming family clients to attend. This sample therefore provides an acceptable nationally representative sample of the Irish farming population across a range of diverse regions, farm sizes and operations.

In addition to probing the succession and retirement intentions of older farmers, survey respondents were also asked to state the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with a set of statements, measured on five-point Likert scales. Based on a review family farm transfer literature, these psychometric scales drew on factors that influence and hinder the succession and retirement process from the perspective of the senior generation. The statements therefore tested a number of hypotheses expressed in this paper by providing an insight into: (i) older farmers' attitudes and opinions regarding the transfer of the family farm to the next generation and (ii) their emotional connection to their farm and occupation. Survey participants were also given the option of supplying their contact details for interview at the next stage of the research process. In terms of data analysis, questionnaire data were coded and then analysed using frequency distribution tables and a series of cross-tabulations performed in the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) programme.

In order to validate, deepen and build on the quantitative data gathered at the Transferring the Family Farm Clinics, the second phase of data collection consisted of a Problem-Centred Interview approach (Witzel, 2000). Witzel (2000) explains that Problem-Centred Interviews 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). This qualitative methodology presented a viable approach to further investigate the behavioural intentions and attitudes of older farmers towards succession and retirement from farming as it gathers objective evidence on human behaviour as well

as on subjective perceptions and ways of processing social reality (Witzel, 2000). Although Problem-Centred interviews contain open ended questions to ensure that respondents can freely and extensively produce a relatively natural dialogue, one of the key principles of this form of interview is that it is centred upon a specific social phenomenon that the interviewer keeps in mind throughout the conversation. A predetermined Problem-Centred Interview guideline therefore allows for a greater emphasis on the specific aspects of the issue that needs to be analysed, which might not be tackled in a narrative interview setting (Scheibelhofer, 2005). This methodological tool also provides a framework of orientation to ensure comparability of interviews (Witzel, 2000). Following frequency distribution and cross-tabulation analysis of survey data obtained at the Teagasc clinics, in conjunction with an additional review of relevant literature in the field, it was possible to draw up a specific Problem-Centred Interview guideline containing pre-formulated questions on the issues that were identified to be subjectively significant to the sample farming population. Given the personal nature of the issues under investigation the use of individual face-to-face interviews was deemed the most appropriate means of obtaining information from the senior generation of the farming community. All interviews were carried out in the homes of the respondents. The interviews lasted up to 2.5 hours and were tape recorded, transcribed in full and assigned pseudonyms to protect participant's privacy. Content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was used to analyse the 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.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

The presented findings are the result of a triangulation of quantitative survey data obtained at the Teagasc Transferring the Family Farm clinics and complimentary Problem-Centred interviews questions formulated upon an analysis of survey data and relevant literature in the field. Over 2,800 farmers attended the 11 clinics and all of the 417 farmers who were randomly selected and then approached to participate in the study agreed to complete the questionnaire, resulting in a 100% response rate. However, as older farmers are the target population of this study, only respondents aged 55 and over have been included in the analysis. The reasoning for specifically focusing on farmers aged 55 and over is that one of the terms and conditions for farmers intending to retire under the Early Retirement Scheme (ERS 3) launched in Ireland in June 2007 was that participants must have been between the ages of 55 and 66 to be eligible. Questionnaires with missing data were also eliminated from the survey to avoid biased statistical results. After both these processes, a total of 324 complete questionnaires qualified for analysis. 60% (n=194) of these respondents also gave their consent to be interviewed more indepthly. A 10% (n=19) sample of these farmers located throughout the Republic of Ireland were sourced and subsequently interviewed using a systematic sampling technique. The overriding themes to emerge from the content analysis of the empirical research were farmers' concerns regarding potential loss of personal identity and stature and the fear of losing their positional control upon transferring their farm and retiring from farming. Problem-centred Interviews with farmers also highlighted 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.

Findings from the questionnaires carried out at the Teagasc clinics indicate that 33% (n=108) of the total number of respondents over the age of 55 in attendance have not considered retiring from farming in the future. 45% (n=145) stated that they have considered retiring while 21% of farmers (n=67) were uncommitted in their answer. 1 farmer did not have any opinion on the matter. As these clinics were geared towards farmers who are considering transferring their family farm, one would expect that the majority of those in attendance would be open to the idea of retirement, however as these findings illustrate, one third of respondents had not even considered it. Problem-Centred Interviews conducted with farmers shed some light on why this is the case. Interviews reveal that the farm and farming occupation completely encapsulate the lives of many farmers. 72 year old dairy farmer Jack from the South East of Ireland has no intention of retiring from farming, despite being in an official farm partnership with his son:

*'Have I considered retiring? Never... I couldn't, I just couldn't! I'd be always saying I'll take it easy, but I couldn't, I have that drive to keep going like.... shur I am up every morning at half 6 and I could be going until 10 or 11 o'clock at night, so I couldn't even imagine it. I make out it wouldn't be good, because I think it's important to be active, I enjoy it like. I like to farm. But if I had to retire, it would not be for a few more years; I'm only 72 like, so definitely not for a few more years'.*

Interestingly, 32% of the 145 questionnaire respondents who considered retiring in the future agreed that they could not imagine what they would do if they permanently ceased all farming activity. Furthermore, 64% of these farmers also agree that the lifestyle quality from being a farmer is far greater than can be quantified by any financial incentive to leave farming. This pattern of findings is consistent with psychological research, showing that attitudes are not necessarily related to behaviours (e.g., Ajzen, 1991). Luke, a 69 year old mixed livestock farmer from the West of Ireland admitted that he had thought about retiring, but quickly dismissed the idea:

*'Well I would think about it sometimes, but shur where am I going to retire to like? It's what I do and it is all I know what to do. Tis fine you could go on holidays there for a week or 10 days, my wife and I often did, but you would just be delighted to go back to the farm, back doing something again, besides doing nothing.... It's hard to retire from farming, because you are always pottering around yanno, it is not possible to retire or leave... I couldn't possibly imagine what I would do next'.*

These findings also mirror previous family business research by Gagnè, et al. (2011) who found that the planned retirement date of the older generation was unrelated to their attitudes toward retirement or to their concrete planning for retirement. According to Gagnè, et al. (2011) 'simply because business leaders have a date in mind for their retirement does neither mean that they perceive their retirement in a positive light nor that they concretely take steps to plan it' (p.300). The above mentioned prominent themes of (i) loss of personal identity, (ii) changes in social stature and (iii) difficulty relinquishing control that were identified as having a significant hindering and deterring influence on the process of transferring the family farm from the perspective of the senior generation will now be discussed. The themes will be linked to relevant issues in family farm transfer literature and effectively portrayed in selected comments direct from the interviewees.

### **5.1 Loss of Personal Identity**

Results from the empirical research indicate that the potential loss of personal identity and self-esteem brought about by transferring managerial control and retiring from the family farm business,

can have a delaying if not detrimental effect on the process. 71% of questionnaire respondents at the Teagasc clinics agree with the notion that farming is not only their job, but also their lifestyle, past time and social outlet. This all-encompassing ideology of the farming occupation is aptly explained by Aoife, a 68 year old mixed livestock farmer interviewed from the Midlands of Ireland:

*'Farming means everything. I get up in the morning to farm, I look out at the weather to see how it will affect my farming. Where I go, who I meet, who I talk to, everything is farming, it is my life, it makes me what I am... It is my whole life, I don't have any other interests''*

Moreover, 87% of questionnaire respondents agree that the farm represents years of hard work and what they have managed to achieve over their lifetime while 68% agree that their farm and occupation have a greater symbolic importance than a financial one to them. Josh, a 70 year old tillage farmer from the South East of Ireland gives an insight into non-monetary values associated with the farm and farming profession:

*'The farm means an awful lot to me, we have been here for 12 or 13 generations, we go back to 1725, so it means a lot to me. It means a lot to me in the sense that I inherited it and I would never ever contemplate selling it... being able to farm it well and make a living out of it has given me a huge sense of satisfaction throughout my lifetime. I'll never be a millionaire but I've enough money to put food on the table and to live a good life and that's the most important thing'.*

These findings also reinforce previous research by Rogers et al. (2013) who argue that identity issues which influence farm management decisions cannot be explained by economics alone. Problem-Centred interviews conducted with farmers discovered that the majority of interviewees felt that being identified as farmer is vitally important to their sense of self-esteem and self-worth in the farming community and the wider social world. For example, Mark, a 61 year old Dairy farmer from the East of Ireland explains that:

*'Farming isn't just my job; it's a way of life for me. I am known far and wide as a farmer at this stage', I am not known as anything else. In fact, I wouldn't wish to be known or identified as anything else! I am proud to be a farmer and I would like to think that being a farmer defines who I am'.*

A number of farmers interviewed believed that they would be seen or perceived differently by others as a 'retired farmer' and therefore struggled to come to terms with the prospect of doing so. Ian, a 67 year old dairy farmer from the South of Ireland recalled how another farmer's experience of an identity crisis upon retiring from farming has warned him away from the process:

*'I can remember speaking to some fella a number of years back and he said that when he sold his farm and gave up farming that he was almost a non-identity afterwards, he wasn't a farmer anymore, he wasn't anything... He said that afterwards he never felt that he could go to farming meetings anymore because all his life he had been a farmer and next thing he wasn't and ya know that story made a major impression on me and has even influenced my own decisions to keep going and not retire ever since'.*

## **5.2 Changes in Social Stature**

In relation to loss of status, findings from the questionnaire also indicate that negative connotations associated with the idea of succession and retirement, especially at a time when the older

generation seek purpose in life and feel needed, respected and valued as they age (Rogers et al., 2013) can become part of an older farmer's indoctrination, thus derailing the process. 87% of farmers surveyed, agree that 'the concept of retirement is not popular or well-regarded within the farming community', a situation unchanged from research carried out in the Republic of Ireland in the 1970s (Commins and Kelleher 1973; Commins, 1973). Following discussions with farmers on this issue, it became strikingly apparent that there seems to be a cultural expectation within the farming community that 'farmers don't retire'. Those who do retire are generally perceived by interviewees to have a defeatist attitude or else seen to have no option but to do so due to ill health. For example, mixed livestock farmer Colm, from the South West explains that:

*'Farmer's don't retire. I'd say the only reason a farmer would retire is because of circumstances in their personal lives or their health... Then again there may be odd people out there who just like to retire and walk away from farming but they would be very much in the minority, I would imagine. I just think it would be seen as defeatist to retire.'*

Numerous interviewees commented that they would also feel isolated and separated from the rest of the farming community if they were to retire from farming. For example, 70 year old beef farmer David from the North West of Ireland explained that:

*'If you give up farming you are gone, I mean you wouldn't be involved anymore. I think other farmer's wouldn't take a bit of notice of me if I retired and I'd imagine that they wouldn't have any interest in the world trying to talk to me about farming either because it would not be worth their while to do so anymore. I would be very conscious of that.'*

Regardless of their age, each farmer interviewed emphasised the essential role that they continue to have in the day-to-day operation of the farm. The majority of interviewees also plan to use their experience and skill to compensate for decreases in physical strength inevitable with age. For example, tillage farmer Josh from the South East explained that he will continue to play a key role in the farm even when he is no longer physically able to provide manual labour:

*'Generally speaking I would say that while you can do hands on farming, which I've done for the past 40 years or 50 years, keep doing it and when you are unable to do so you can always have an input from a management perspective and from an experience perspective.... That way you can still have an influence and play a productive role in the farm.'*

Rossier (2012) previously pointed out that 'decades of hard work have left their mark on those who farm for a living' (p. 90) and therefore keeping up activities on the farm in old age and remaining embedded in the farming community serves to create meaning, value and purpose in their lives (ibid). 71% of farmers surveyed agree that it was hugely important for them to be still viewed as a skilled, productive farmer amongst their peers to maintain their status in the farming community. A major complicating factor for older farmers faced with the prospect of transferring the family farm, relinquishing control and retiring, may be the fear that their social stature in the farming world practically evaporates overnight, leading to a sense of insignificance and a lack of purpose.

### **5.3 Difficulty Relinquishing Control**

In addition to an anticipated loss of identity and status, results from the empirical research indicate that the senior generation of farmers may resist succession and retirement planning as a

means of sustaining their positional dominance as head of the family farm. Surprisingly, 71% of respondents who had not considered retiring from farming in the future have in fact identified a potential successor to their farm somewhat contradicting the fact that 60% of these very farmers felt that the younger generation had the required experience, knowledge and skills to take over from them. Problem-Centred interviews identified that the idea of relinquishing control of the farm was not popular amongst many participants, in fact some went so far as to say that they would experience great difficulty in doing so, even if it was to their own children (see Barclay et al. 2012; Price and Conn, 2012; Whitehead et al., 2012). For example, beef farmer David from the North West has great difficulty transferring over the family farm to his son:

*'I have a son who is 30 this year and he wants to settle down and farm here and I suppose in a sensible ideal world I should transfer over the farm to him and my wife and I should buy a house in the local village or somewhere else and let him move in here. Well that would be in a sensible world, but I wouldn't even consider or suggest that. I am certainly not prepared to let go of what I have just yet'.*

Results from the research identify that 60% of farmers who have not considered retiring from farming agree with the suggestion that they would no longer be seen as having a leading role in their household and local community if they relinquished control and retired. Problem-Centred interviews confirmed that such a prospect places significant emotional stress on many participants. Tillage farmer Josh from the South East explains:

*'Well I think history would tend to prove that that is the case. I know a lot of cases where farmer's have hung on and not transferred over but the minute they handed it over then their relationship and role suddenly changed within the family and that is a danger. Retirement changes the relationship with other farmers too, it certainly does and that is also a worrying factor'.*

These findings confirm the premise put forward by Pitts et al. (2009) who pointed out that the 'senior generation might be reluctant to engage in succession planning, as surrendering control of the farm relegates them to a more peripheral role' (p.61).

## **6. Conclusion**

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and competing emotions currently derailing and deterring intergenerational family farm transfer. Many farmers' identity and self-esteem are strongly attributed to their occupation and as a result sacrificing one's professional and personal identity upon transferring managerial control of the farm and retiring is a concept that they find difficult to accept. Our research finds that farmers resist transferring the farm on the basis of an anticipated loss of the recognition and social status that has accompanied their position as an active and productive farmer in society. Subsequently the senior generation resist succession and retirement planning as a means of sustaining their position as head of the family farm. The thought of being 'retired' is found to be particularly arduous for them. Consequently even the most sophisticated of family farm transfer plans are of little avail if policy makers and practitioners are not adequately cognizant and understanding of 'the language of farming' (Burton, 2004, p. 212) and how painful it is for the older generation of farmers to 'let go'.

Empirical findings brought focus on the suitability of farm transfer policy strategies such as Early Retirement Schemes put in place in the Republic of Ireland over the past four decades. These schemes, we argue, had little or no regard for older farmer's emotions and were excessively preoccupied with financial incentives to encourage the process. While such economic efforts to confront the issue are important and indeed have been in many aspects well meaning, empirical findings here have identified many more facets to the farm transfer decision-making process, which in large part have been neglected. The outcome; a derailment of the process in many cases. For example, the eligibility requirements for farmers entering the most recent Early Retirement Scheme for farmers (ERS 3) (June, 2007), was that 'Persons intending to retire under the Scheme shall cease agricultural activity forever'. Essentially, farmers were being asked to revise their self-perceptions upon retirement. This largely unsuccessful scheme (it was suspended in October, 2008) was completely oblivious to the mind-set of many farmers as exemplified here. Being recognised as an active and productive farmer in society has been acknowledged as being central to a farmer's sense of self. Thus the prospect of going from being an active and productive farmer to permanently ceasing all farming activity upon retirement as demanded in this retirement scheme, forces older farmers to face a number of what could be termed, painful realities. Realities that come with the consciousness of letting go of one's professional identity, becoming a retiree and becoming more and more dependent on others. The resultant outcome leads farmers, in many cases to resist the process.

In an era of unprecedented transition in global agriculture, we acknowledge that the global phenomenon of an aging farming population calls for and justifies the development of various incentives to stimulate and entice family farm transfer. This will enable enthusiastic young farmers gain access to productive assets and subsequently improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector. One such policy is the farm partnership model, where two or more partners operate their enterprises jointly. This model can be seen as a stepping stone to farm transfer, however, similar to the sporadic uptake of previous Early Retirement Schemes, the low number of farm partnerships currently in operation in the Republic of Ireland indicates that policies and supports need to be amended in order to encourage greater participation. In an attempt to spur on the process, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine launched a collaborative farming scheme in 2015, funded under Ireland's Rural Development Programme and co-funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), to 'encourage the establishment of new farm partnership arrangements by contributing to the legal, advisory and financial services costs incurred by farmers in the drawing up of their farm partnership agreement' (DAFM, 2015). While this is still very new, what is interesting here however is that this scheme has again a simplified view of the factors influencing the process and fails to deal with the complex emotional dynamics facing ageing farmers identified in this research.

We argue that any new initiative put in place to support and encourage intergenerational family farm transfer a policy must be accompanied by a comprehensive set of interventions to deal with the personal and social loss an older farmer may experience upon transferring the family farm. In order to do this, we advocate that future policies and programmes relating to family farm transfer must develop effective strategies that addresses the emotional well-being of elderly farmers. For example, on its own, and with the numerous perceived negative connotations associated with it identified, perhaps the term 'Early Retirement Scheme' is no longer appropriate for policy to use in a

farming context. Perhaps the term 'Farm Progression Scheme' would be more effective as it portrays a sense of purposefulness rather than one of cessation to an elderly farmer. In addition, instead of reporting that farm management decisions are in the hands of a generation who may be more resistant to structural change and growth, policy makers and key stakeholders need to embrace, publically promote and recognise the older generation's invaluable store of knowledge, skills and years of experience working on the farm that the younger generation have not yet accumulated. The feeling of still being valued and needed in society may reinforce the older farmers' morale and sense of purpose in the face of the gradual diminishment of their physical capacities. This may help to diminish the stigma and defeatist stereotype associated with transferring the family farm and subsequently promote a more positive and wilful attitude towards the process over time. The development of such strategies concerning the human dynamics of family farm transfer has the potential to greatly ease the stresses of the process. Anyone who considers such recommendations to be too idealistic, should remember that we all inevitably have to face the prospect of letting go of our professional tasks and ties in our old age. No one can avoid aging and as this research has identified, most elderly farmers opt to maintain the facade of normal day to day activity and behaviour instead of retiring. As such, this paper, in attempting to understand the world as farmers perceive it, can be drawn upon to inform future policy directions and as a consequence prevent older farmers from being isolated and excluded from society almost by accident rather than intention. This research is but a start however and the insights given and issues raised will hopefully stimulate further investigations along these lines.

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