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The Importance of Next Generation Farmers: A Conceptual Framework to Bring the Potential Successor into Focus

Abstract

Intergenerational succession is understood as an integral facet of the family farm. The importance of the succession process and more specifically, successor identification, are critically discussed in the context of the widely propagated projections of global population growth and associated demands on the agricultural sector. Having established the merits of successor identification the article then highlights the absence of the 'potential successor' from contemporary research and continues by offering a conceptual framework, capable of bringing this important research subject into focus as an autonomous and valuable actor, which, given the anticipated *renaissance* in agriculture, is perhaps now, more important than ever.

Keywords: succession; family farming; successors; renaissance in agriculture

1 Introduction

Intergenerational succession represents an integral facet of the family farm. Widely understood as an "imperative in family farming" (Price and Conn, 2012: 143), succession refers to the transfer of managerial control over the use of farm business assets (Gasson and Errington, 1993). Work by Lobley *et al* (2002) reported that 84% of surveyed farms operated "established family farms"[1], responsible for 86% of the area covered in the survey. In addition to its numerical importance, succession is also understood to wield a powerful influence on the development of the farm, impressing "something of its own structural and moral pattern on the way farm businesses develop" (Hutson, 1987: 228). In their seminal paper, Potter and Lobley (1992) observed how farmers lacking a successor were increasingly likely to have simplified their enterprise structure and were farming less intensively than they had done previously, whilst identification of a successor frequently acted as a trigger and a means of facilitating business development. For Price and Conn (2012: 142) "the platform family arrangements [such as succession] provide for farm agri-economic decisions continues to be underestimated". It has long been accepted that "in the patterns of succession today can be read the shape of farming futures to come" (Potter and Lobley, 1996: 305) and as agriculture begins to grapple with a litany of challenges to meet the demands of an increasing global population, in an increasingly constrained context, the importance of a willing and able 'next

[1] An established family farm refers to a farm run by operators who are at least the second generation of their family to be farming on the same farm or nearby land

generation' of farmers has been brought to the fore (Lobley *et al*, 2010). But an accurate and up-to-date understanding of the intentions of Britain's successors, remains worryingly lacking, with sample surveys estimating the proportion of farmers with a successor at anything between 30 per cent and 70 per cent (Gasson and Errington, 1993); an understanding hampered by a surprising lack academic of engagement with the potential next generation of farmers, stemming quite simply from the absence of a clear understanding of who 'the successor' is.

It is essential to appreciate the "rich research tradition in rural studies of examining the link between intergenerational transfer of farmland, enterprise growth and the persistence of family farms" (Inwood and Sharp, 2012: 107). Research has previously predicted the likelihood of succession (Potter and Lobley, 1992, 1996; Ward and Lowe, 1994; Errington, 1998; Lobley *et al*, 2002, ADAS, 2004; Lobley *et al*, 2005), rigorously evinced the impact of succession status on the farm business trajectory (Errington and Tranter, 1991; Potter and Lobley, 1992; Potter and Lobley, 1996; Sottomayor *et al*, 2008; Calus and Van Huylenbroeck, 2008; Inwood and Sharp, 2012) and scrupulously documented the 'handing over of the reins' (Hastings, 1984; Hutson, 1987; Blanc and Perrier-Cornet 1992; Uchiyama *et al*, 2008; Lobley *et al*, 2010). Yet, a common feature of this research tradition is reprehensibly the absence of 'the successor'. Just as Mark Riley observed in his seminal contribution to *Children's Geographies* in 2009, farm children have "featured in academic research, but only as marginal figures" (Riley, 2009: 245), 'the successor', is similarly considered, included in succession studies by implication and through mere passing references that are typically framed through the words of 'the farmer'.

This article critically establishes *why* the academic community needs to start engaging with 'the successor' and worryingly reveals how the successor continues to be hidden in the shadows of academic research; silent and subsumed. It continues by offering a conceptual framework which introduces the term 'potential successor', capable of bringing this important research subject into focus as an autonomous and valuable actor.

2 The Importance of the Succession Process

In the UK, as well as many other countries, families are responsible for most farms and much farmed land and the main route into farming remains intergenerational transfer within the family (ADAS *et al*, 2004; Lobley *et al*, 2002). Not only were 81.5 per cent of farms in a, 2002 survey conducted by Lobley *et al* second generation farms, but 28 per cent of these established family farms were able to trace their family's occupancy of that farm to the 1900s or earlier and 63 per cent had been responsible for their farm for at least 20 years. For Lobley *et al* (2010: 50), the "prominence of

succession as the means of farm transfer should, alone, suggest the need for greater understanding and effort". In addition to its prevalence, the process of handing over managerial control sees the associated transfer of farm-specific or soil-specific human capital, believed to confer an advantage on an intergenerational successor (Laband and Lentz, 1983).

However, for Lobley and Baker (2012: 17) the impact of succession "extends beyond the transfer of knowledge", succession is also understood to wield a powerful influence on development of the farm. Indeed, a considerable body of evidence confirms how "a farm's succession status is a good predictor of its trajectory" (Potter and Lobley, 1996: 189).

Potter and Lobley (1996) identify what they term the 'succession effect', which refers to the impact the *expectation* of succession has on the farm business. By anticipating a successor, it is likely that the farms may have been expanded or restructured as a means of either supporting the successor and the family on the farm, or to perhaps generate necessary capital to establish children on a separate holding. A considerable body of evidence highlights the existence of the 'succession effect', one of the earliest examples is from Symes (1973: 101) who observed that land on non-successor farms was less intensively farmed than on farms where a potential successor was identified. In their paper *Ageing and Succession on Family Farms,* Potter and Lobley (1992) aimed to develop an understanding of the decisions made by farmers in old age, given that in 1991 21 per cent of farmers were 65 or more. Instead their empirical work revealed how "elderly farmers with successors seem far less differentiated from the rest of the sample, having farmed areas, enterprise structures and levels of farming intensity that are close to the average for the sample as a whole". In stark contrast, Potter and Lobley (1992) noted how farmers without potential successors are significantly more likely to have simplified or reduced their enterprise mix, low capital spending and a static enterprise structure, but was most significant in terms of the amount of purchased inputs, such as fertilizers and chemicals.

Elaborating on the 'succession effect', Calus and Van Huylenbroeck (2008: 45) observed a "positive relationship between a farmer's early awareness of whether a successor is available and the management of the farm". Farms where a potential successor had been identified prompted the increase of Total Farm Assets (TFA) value by an average of €37,763 on Flemish farms, elucidating the successor effect. More recently, Inwood and Sharp (2012) identified how identification of an heir represents a pivotal moment within the farm lifecycle, representing a cross roads between negative adaptations (winding down in preparation for exit) and positive adaptations (enterprise growth in preparation for additional family members).

2.1 The Value of Successor Identification

British agriculture, "endowed with natural and economic advantages in food production" (Fish *et al*, 2012: 3) now recognises its 'moral duty' to respond, both to secure its own and international food supplies. Set against the widely propagated projections of global population growth, the UK food security strategy maintains: "we need to increase food production to feed a growing world population" and "we want UK agriculture to produce as much food as possible" (Defra, 2010: 12), but in the context of increasingly acute limits and emerging constraints, including environmental change, fossil fuels and land (Fish *et al*, 2012). In the context of these increasing and multifarious demands on farmers and the agricultural sector, or what they refer to as the 'challenges of the future', Lobley et al (2010) have suggested, we can undoubtedly derive benefit from effective succession, measured firstly in terms of the existence of a potential successor, and secondly, according to the 'smoothness' of the transfer of managerial control.

Although the *exact* contours of the emerging political agenda remain unknown, primarily because the science is at present, too immature (Lobley and Winter, 2009), what is known is rising to aforementioned challenges with require new ways of thinking in almost *every* aspect of agricultural production and "without *significant innovation* and *adaptation* in capacities to produce food, humanity faces a bleak and divided future" (Fish et al, 2012: 2, emphasis added) that will involve holistic changes to agricultural practice (Sage, 2012); changes that successor-farms will have the incentive, motivation and means to make. Intensification of production forms an essential component of the food security agenda and it is encouraging to note how intensification is frequently observed amongst farmers with identified heirs (Sottomayor et al, 2011; Potter and Lobley, 1992). However, as Lobley and Winter (2009: 6) note "if we were facing only shortages of food and energy, then a modern-day equivalent of the war-time 'dig for victory' would be the order of the day", efforts made to meet global demand for food need to, concomitantly, sustain our environment, safeguard our landscape and produce what consumers want (Benn, 2009). Given the patent environmental impacts associated with an intensive farming regime, it seems incongruous to suggest that intensive practices are the answer, particularly when there is evidence to suggest, farmers without identified heirs are known to actively "reduce their use of purchased inputs like fertilizers and farm chemicals" (Potter and Lobley, 1992: 332). There are also many behaviours associated with the failure to identify a successor that are of interest; idling land for example is widely associated with wildlife enhancement or benefits to the landscape (Whitehead, Lobley and Baker, 2012). The desirability of successor-farms in the context of the context of the challenges we face, is not solely concerned with the *outcome* of activities associated with successor-farms, critically

it is the *nature* of these behaviours that make successor identification desirable. Successor-farms are motivated, as well as increasingly disposed to adaptation, investment and expansion, driven by their 'generational stake' in their potential successor, providing an incentive for planning and expansion (Gasson and Errington, 1993).

Having identified a potential successor, the effective transfer of the 'reins of the business' is also conducive with the proclaimed need to secure food supplies in an increasingly constrained context. Given appropriate levels of responsibility and experience, the potential successor is adequately prepared to run *all* aspects of the farm and possesses a profusion of indispensable tacit knowledge, safeguarding farm productivity levels when the farm is transferred. In contrast, inefficient transfer of managerial control "may lead to farm businesses less well placed to adapt to and succeed in responding to the challenges of the future" (Lobley et al, 2010: 61).

Although just one piece in a very large and increasingly complex jigsaw puzzle, if we truly want to 'exploit spare capacity in farming' (National Farmers' Union, cited in Potter, 2009: 53), significant benefit can be derived from effective succession, measured firstly in terms of the existence of a successor, and secondly, according to the 'smoothness' of the transfer of managerial control. It is important to note however, despite the preceding case for effective succession, intergenerational succession is not, neither should be the *only* means of entry into the farming industry. The Northfield Committee (1979) warned of a 'closed shop' in agriculture, where successive generations continued to farm to fulfil a moral obligation to their predecessors. The 'new blood' effect of entrants for outside the sector has long been recognised and will continue to be valued as the sector responds to emerging challenges.

3 The Succession Crisis?

Having established that effective succession is "in the interests of efficient farming for the business and country, providing perhaps the best model for succession" (Lobley et al, 2010: 61), it is disconcerting how in the UK, the preceding fifteen years has seen the propagation of the notion that British farming has endured a 'crisis in succession'. A national survey of 26,000 farm business in 1991 found that 48 per cent of respondents had no nominated successors for their farm (National Westminster Bank, 1992). Writing in 1996, Ward (1996: 210) claimed "succession is being increasingly called into question by farm families" resulting in a "gradual decline in the proportion of farmers planning to hand on their farms". More recently, Lobley *et al* (2010: 62) evidenced this crisis with the trend in student applications to agricultural colleges and universities, which they claim to

"have decreased dramatically in the last three decades in the UK, resulting in the reduction of postschool educational provision in agriculture as departments close across the country".

Despite widespread assumptions that British farming was facing a succession crisis, further investigation has prompted many commentators to suggest "crisis may be too strong a word" (Lobley, 2010: 15). A significant body of evidence dismissed the crisis, pointing instead to "relatively high rates of succession and hints at the ongoing persistence and tenacity of family farmers" (Lobley, 2010: 9). Although in Lobley *et al*'s (2002) study of the implications of changes in the structure of agricultural business, found that only 33 per cent of respondents had identified a successor to continue the business, this rate increased significantly with age. For example, 45 per cent of those aged 55-65 and 60 per cent of those aged 65 and over, reported having identified a successor. A total of only 5 per cent of the farmers from the six diverse study areas of the UK anticipated leaving farming in the coming 5 years *without* a successor. Later in, 2006, Lobley, Butler and Winter completed a postal survey of 1852 farmers in South West England, revealed that anticipated rates of succession on farms operated by farmers in their 60s were "only marginally lower than rates recorded by the English *FARMTRANSFERS* surveys in the 1990s" (Lobley, 2010: 11); the case against the crisis in succession is further strengthened given that this stability continued in the context of increasing pressures exerted by the 2003 CAP reform and the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak. Although the data are geographically limited and becoming increasingly dated (Lobley, 2010), quantitatively, the figures are suggest the "overall picture of the entry and exit situation of UK farming is one of relative stability" (ADAS et al, 2004: 54).

Although using this data, Lobley (2010) confidently dismissed the crisis of succession stating that "English farming does not, at present, face a crisis of succession" (Lobley, 2010: 14), he continues by suggesting "to what degree this sentiment is shared by [farmers'] children and potential successors is less clear" (Lobley, 2010: 11). He draws on the response of one farmer in Lobley et al's (2005) research, who contested the apparent stability of anticipated succession rates:

> "I've got three sons under eighteen and they aren't really interested, they see the farm as somewhere to get a bit of pocket money from but they don't see it as a way of life." (Discussion Group Respondent, Lobley et al, 2005: 20).

A detailed review of the merits of the evidence used to elucidate said crisis are beyond the scope of this paper, what is important here is the debate surrounding the crisis serves to highlight that as an academic community we have failed to engage with the successor. Just as demonstrated by the farmer's narrative, above, the research surrounding the supposed succession crisis has relied on the

farmer voice to paint a worrying, but largely unfounded picture, because of insufficient engagement *with* the successor. Whilst this article recognises the successor has not been entirely absent from previous succession research, research has offered scant opportunity for successors themselves to document their experiences, opinions and most importantly their intentions. Whilst work by ADAS *et al* (2004), who targeted past students of Agricultural Colleges and Universities in their semi-structure postal survey and conducted in-depth telephone interviews with new entrants, and more recently Price and Conn (2012) who included both farmers and successors in their research design, provide welcome exceptions to this observation, our understanding of the number of willing successors, as well as our understanding of the process of succession draws *largely* on the farmer's voice.

Although Chris Philo's (1992) plea to give much needed attention to 'neglected rural geographies' spawned significant interest into gender and sexuality, and later childhood and youth, Mark Riley (2009: 245) observes how, despite welcomed engagement with rural youth, "children on farms have remained relatively under investigated". Although the potential successor is not always a child or young person, for example in the case of Riley's (2009) work he specifically defines 'children' as 7-11 year olds and 'young people' as 11-15 year olds, much of his discussion is applicable to the subsumption of the successor in academic research. In his shrewd critique of children's Geographies, Riley (2009) states how farm children have merely featured in academic research as marginal figures discussed as part of farm labour (Gasson and Errington, 1993) or as possible successors to the farm (Potter and Lobley, 1996a). Most damningly, like the farm child, the successor is the subject of "passing references, most commonly framed through the words of parents" (Riley, 2009: 246), the following example, taken from Lobley *et al*'s (2005) work provides a prime example:

> "My son was working on the farm but now he owns a business... He was at an agricultural college for two to three years and as he said 'farming is going to be crap so I'm going to get a job'. He's keen on farming but it was the financial side… He could see no future in it." (Discussion Group Respondent, Lobley *et al*, 2005: 19).

Here, the tendency "to focus on adult reflections on both their own childhood and as spokesperson for the experiences of their children" (Riley, 2009: 247) is patently clear. Lobley *et al* (2005) are reliant on the farmer as the 'spokesperson' for the potential successor; enervating the reliability of conclusions made regarding the strength of familial commitment to farming from this statement.

3.1 The True Crisis in Succession

Although for Lobley (2010), whilst crisis may be too strong a word, he believes there are other important questions to be answered regarding succession, stressing that high levels of succession

alone cannot secure the future of British agriculture. Problems with the efficiency of the transfer of managerial control, also pose a tangible threat to the industry's ability to rise to the challenges of the future. For example, the *farmer's boy* describes a common situation, particularly in England (Lobley *et al*, 2010) where "the potential successor may spend many years working with (or more accurately "for") his father" (Gasson and Errington, 1993: 205), yet has little input in terms of managerial activities or decision making, and is mainly utilised as a source of manual labour. Essentially, the successor is a hired worker and resultantly "has little opportunity to develop the managerial skills that he will eventually need in taking over the family farm business" (Gasson and Errington, 1993: 205). The *farmer's boy* is likely to gain managerial control suddenly, with the father's retirement, incapacity or death and is therefore "ill-prepared for the management of the farm" (Gasson and Errington, 1993: 205). It is well documented that Gasson and Errington's (1993) *farmer's boy* will lack the "motivation, confidence and competence to make decisions, thus increasing the risk of expensive mistakes being made" (Hastings, 2004: 1) when assuming control of the farm.

However, our understanding of the handover of the reins of the business is similarly debilitated by a lack of engagement with successors and a reliance on the farmer. An extensive review of research in this area revealed a familiar exclusion of the successor (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Research into Transfer of Managerial Control

Research	Data Collection Method	Subject(s) Targeted in Data Collection
Hastings (1984)	Interviews and surveys with twenty-five farmers and thirty-six sons	Principal farmer Potential successors
Hutson (1987)	'Full' interviews with 50 farmers	Principal farmer
Errington and Tranter (1991)	Postal survey in England, France, Ontario and Quebec	Principal farmer
Blanc and Perrier-Cornet (1992)	Data from the Farm Accounting Data Network (from EC Member states) and 120 'in-depth studies' of European family farms	Principal farmer Farm family
Errington (1998)	Postal survey in England, France, Ontario and Quebec	Principal farmer
Errington (2002)	FARMTRANSFERS international postal survey	Principal farmer
Uchiyama *et al* (2008)	FARMTRANSFERS international postal survey	Principal farmer
Lobley *et al* (2010)	FARMTRANSFERS international postal survey	Principal farmer
Lobley (2010)	FARMTRANSFERS international postal survey	Principal farmer

Although it is important to recognise that a lot of this work does refer directly *to* the successor, for example, the FARMTRANSFERS survey asked "to indicate if a number of specific decisions are made by the farmer alone, shared with the successor, or made by the successor alone" (Lobley *et al*, 2010: 53), the survey was solely completed by the principal farmer. Given the widely observed difficulty farmers have in relinquishing control over the farm, particularly surrounding prolonged control of the finances, this reliance on the farmer for our understanding of the transfer of managerial control raises some realistic concerns about the validity of the responses. And although the results concurred, demonstrating said difficulty, would incorporation of the potential successor into the data collection process have more accurately revealed the level of difficulty farmers are having in relinquishing control? In her seminal paper on the exclusion of children from geographical study, Sarah James (1990: 283) appeals to the academic community to "view the reality through the eyes of *both* children and adults", claiming "to do otherwise is to remain half blind". Likewise, our understanding of the succession process is similarly debilitated.

Overall, our understanding of the potential next generation of farmers, including their intentions, and their experiences of succession, hinge largely on the interpretation of the principal farmer, who acts as "the spokesperson for all the individuals hidden behind the family façade" (Price and Evans, 2006: 3).

4 Potential Successors and the 'Renaissance in Agriculture'

The belief that the (re)emergence of the food security agenda or what Whitehead, Lobley and Baker (2012) have termed the *renaissance* in agriculture, "*will undoubtedly influence* the minds of potential successors", gives further impetus to engage with the potential successor. Although Whitehead, Lobley and Baker (2012) rightfully ask how the *renaissance* in agriculture will influence the potential successor, which refreshingly highlights the successor as an important and integral actor in the context of food security, it is yet to be empirically investigated. Worryingly, given the importance of effective succession to the future of food and farming, evidenced in the preceding discussion, *nothing* is known about how potential successors are speaking to this emergent agenda.

Although the widely observed feeling about the future of the industry is one of positivity, for example, Professor David Hughes famously suggested in 2010, how he "couldn't help but notice that farmers are back in fashion!" (Hughes, 2010) and, similarly, Andersons Agricultural Consultants cheerfully proposed, "farmers as producers of food and fuel in a dangerous world, are being valued once again" (Andersons Agricultural Consultants, 2007), Fish *et al* (2012) recently reported mixed feelings from farmers regarding their future in the context of the food security agenda. They documented many negative precedents expressed to forge the argument that, "we ought to keep the price up by low production" (Fish *et al*, 2012: 7); raising valid concerns over the intentions and beliefs of potential successors in response to the supposed *renaissance* in agriculture.

Although, their research brings much needed attention to the farmer, lost amidst the broad literature developing on the political and scientific aspects of food security, Fish *et al* (2012) were solely concerned with the understandings' of principal farmers. Although they observe it is in "agricultural uses of land…in which emerging agendas for food security *will* find their material expression" (Fish *et al*, 2012: 1, emphasis added), the mean age of the survey respondents was 57, and over 80 per cent of deliberative polling respondents aged over 50, many of whom, it is not overly contentious to suggest, may not be farming when these agendas ultimately "find their material expression". So although, by the inclusion of the farming community, Fish *et al* make important headway in academic discussion of food security, they ignore the most significant actor, the next generation of farmers.

By bringing this valuable actor into focus, the following conceptual framework aims to facilitate understanding potential successors' intentions and experiences in the context of the anticipated *renaissance* in agriculture.

5 Bringing the Potential Successor into Focus: A Conceptual Framework

Having established the absence of the potential successor from the succession research, it becomes pertinent to explore what has caused this neglect. The exclusion of the potential successor stems from the confusion surrounding what we *actually* understand succession to mean, for example, Ward and Lowe (1994: 174) recognise the "the blurring in the terminology" "between 'inheritance' and 'succession'". Lost amongst this confusion is who or what the successor is and as a result the

term has gained multiple and overlapping meanings, which have been compounded by fleeting references to 'the successor' in the associated literature. For example, Linda Price and Rachel Conn's recent publication, which I champion for refreshingly targeting *both* farmers and successors in their research process, gives no consideration to who or what the successor is, having vaguely requested "the existing business holder pass the second questionnaire onto an identified successor" (Price and Conn, 2012: 148). Ultimately, 'the successor' has been used as a catch-all term, alluding to several entirely different people and circumstances that can be broadly divided into three, including:

1. Perhaps most common in the literature is the use of the term successor to describe someone who is (actively) moving towards managerial control of the farm. In Potter and Lobley's (1992: 318) discussion, they talk of a successor being someone 'in the wings'; someone who *will* take over the farm.
2. In some cases, the term successor can merely refer to someone, who by virtue of nothing more than their relationship to the farmer, typically the farmer's son, is *likely* to gain managerial control over the farm.
3. The term also refers to someone who *has* gained managerial control of the farm. In their recent paper on small family farms in Ohio, Steiger *et al* (2012: 96) talk of successors as being "current farmers who had inherited the farm (making themselves successors)"

Without a clear understanding of whom or what the potential successor is, they have been understandably excluded from our research. Critically, the proposed framework (Figure 1.1) distinguishes between the above positions and offers a rigorous and clear definition of who the potential successor is.

As distinguished in Figure 1.1, the **successor** is someone that *has* succeeded and is now in managerial control of the farm. If we understand succession as "the transfer of managerial control over the use of farm business assets" (Gasson and Errington, 1993), then the successor must be someone who *has* succeeded; someone who *has* achieved managerial control over the use of said assets. To become a successor you have to have succeeded.

According to the framework, the potential successor becomes the successor having achieved *full managerial control of the farm*, where full managerial control is defined as having the ultimate control over *all* aspects of the farm, including the finances, recognised by many as "the last bastion of the father's control" (Hastings, 1984: 199). According to this framework, there are no other criteria for 'becoming' a successor. This challenges Gasson and Errington's (1993) belief that inheritance, or transfer of ownership, "confers the right to take decisions over the disposition of

assets" and thus marks the 'creation' of the successor, by automatically reassigning managerial control. Although, Gasson and Errington's view *may* often be the case, it is possible that the successor may assume managerial control at the same time as inheritance, or even before.

In contrast, the **potential successor** is someone who could, potentially, in the future, gain managerial control of the farm. The potential successor can assume two distinct 'positions':

(i) The **possible successor** is assumed to be the future successor, typically by virtue of a kin relationship to the farmer. The possible successor is someone who is *assumed* to be the future successor, by virtue of their relationship to the farmer. This can be the farmer's assumption or the potential successor's assumption. A farmer's son, currently too young to have a say in the matter, maybe considered by the farmer, as the future successor. For example, in their survey of English farmers, Errington and Tranter (1991) claim that a quarter of farmers had identified a successor by the time their eldest son is 10 years old. But until the son is old enough to decide for himself what he intends to do, he can only be considered a 'possible' successor.

(ii) The **prospective successor** is (actively) moving towards managerial control of the farm. The prospective successor is someone who is, as a result of a formal or informal arrangement between the current farmer, the farming family and themselves, on course, and typically, but not always, actively moving towards gaining managerial control of the farm. Although this is a likely step, it is by no means universal. Many successors may bypass this step, perhaps suddenly gaining full managerial control over night, upon the death or incapacity of the farmer.

The progression from a possible successor to a prospective successor is described as the *Possible-Prospective Transition*. It denotes any kind of *collective* recognition and agreement between the farmer, the farming family[2] and the potential successor(s), that *the* potential successor(s) *will* in time, succeed to the farm (although some commentators observe a more nebulous identification process, where a natural prospective successor just 'is'). This can be the result of an informal conversation or more formal succession plan and can occur at a specific time or can be a protracted transition. The framework also demarcates the point at which the potential successor becomes the successor. The point of *Successor Creation*, is achieved when the potential successor gains full managerial control of the farm.

6 Why are these distinctions important?

[2] The 'farming family' can extend beyond the farming household to include, relatives such as the farmer's off-spring, siblings or parents

This distinction is more than a convoluted semantic debate, because the successor, prospective successor and possible successor are three distinct actors with contrasting thoughts, experiences and perspectives. Given the benefit to be derived from effective succession, we need, in the context of the plethora of challenges facing the industry, to "develop a clearer understanding of the process of intergenerational transfer" (Lobley *et al*, 2010: 61). We simply cannot develop this desired understanding without incorporating the potential successor into our research and giving them a voice.

The central aim of the conceptual framework is to highlight the potential successor as a distinct and therefore accessible research subject to the wider academic community. Unlike the successor, who having graduated through the 'occupational choice process' (Mann, 2007) has taken over the farm, the potential successor is an entirely different actor, who will be disposed to and susceptible to, a wide range of influences and factors, none perhaps more significant than the anticipated and largely unexplored renaissance in agriculture.

By offering a clear definition of who the potential successor is (and just as importantly, isn't), it is hoped that it will encourage further engagement with them, in a field that, as highlighted in the preceding discussion of the literature, has often prioritised farmer voice, thus facilitating a more well-rounded and widely informed understanding of the process of succession. More specifically, given the importance of a next generation of farmers to the industry's propensity to adapt to and succeed in responding to the challenges of the future, we need, now more than ever, to enhance our understanding of the intentions of potential successors. By distinguishing the potential successor as specific research subject and promoting engagement with them, it is hoped it will improve the accuracy, and depth, of our understanding of the likely availability of a next generation of farmers.

The additional distinction between the possible successor and the prospective successor offered by the conceptual framework highlights them as autonomous research subjects. The experiences, attitudes and intentions of a possible successor, who merely, by virtue of a kin relationship to the farmer is *assumed* to be the future successor, are likely to differ greatly to someone who has expressed their intention to succeed and is actively moving towards its managerial control. The conceptual framework draws the researcher's attention to this difference.

Furthermore, it is envisioned that this further distinction made between the possible and the prospective successor has the potential to inform the design of data collection methods, such as questionnaires, resulting in a more nuanced understanding of succession status. Rather than simply categorising farmers as either *having* or *not having* a potential successor, farmers can be categorised

as having a possible successor, a prospective successor or no successor. Although no succession is ever guaranteed, it has long been observed the succession of the prospective successor, who is (actively) moving towards managerial control, is perhaps most assured (Fennell, 1981); on the basis of this, we can obtain a more 'telling' insight into the future likelihood of succession.

More widely speaking, by distinguishing between to the possible successor and the prospective successor, the framework has potential to enhance the effectiveness of the targeting and delivery of government or non-government organisation (NGO) support. By distinguishing between the possible and the prospective successor there is potential for farm families to be 'matched up' with resources or services that suit their specific circumstances, with the main aim of increasing the chances of effective succession. For example, whilst strategies that encourage a greater understanding of the range of rewarding opportunities offered by farming as a career and promote farming as an aspirational career choice would be more appropriately targeted at possible successors, the prospective successor, who is (actively) moving towards managerial control of the farm and the farmer, who he will succeed, are likely to benefit from advice on managing the prospective successor's ascent up the 'succession ladder' and the farmer's transition into retirement, to ultimately reduce the likelihood of the 'farmer's boy' route, so typical in England (Lobley *et al*, 2010).

Ultimately, it is hoped this discussion, and the distinctions made by the conceptual framework, gives the academic community much to consider. As an industry, farming will have to rise to a plethora of challenges in the coming decades, and as previously stressed, the industry can derive real benefit from effective succession. By clearly identifying the potential successor as a distinct and autonomous research subject, it is hoped it will encourage more potential successor-focused research, which will in turn, ensure a rigorous understanding of an increasingly important process, and, critically, give a much needed voice to a previously neglected actor.

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Fig. 1 Defining the Potential Successor: A Conceptual Framework