Journal of Rural Studies 80 (2020) 532–542

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Assemblage and the 'good farmer': New entrants to crofting in scotland

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A B S T R A C T

In this paper we advance the conceptualisation of the 'good farmer' through integration of Bourdieusian concepts with DeLanda's assemblage theory. Considering new farms as assemblages is useful to unlock the relative power of association amongst component parts, and to understand what drives the emergence of a farm. Utilising an empirical case study of new entrants to crofting in Scotland, we assess the interlinked processes of new symbolic capital formation and new croft establishment. Following Bourdieu, the 'good farmer' concept provides an approach to identify how established and shifting norms of crofting shape new holding establishment. Findings develop the materiality of social and cultural capital formation, with 'good crofting' ideals coded in relation to land capacity, practical experiences working the farm, multifunctional transitions and crofting legislation. New entrants actively 'territorialise' (define) their crofts by integrating new markets and management practices. The historicity of new farm assemblage is evident in the active mobilisation of historic images to inform expectations of productivity. The authors argue that integration of assemblage theory with Bourdieusian concepts elucidates the flexibility of farming forms and identities, the role of 'more-than-human' actants in farming identity construction, and the role of legislation in shaping understanding of what farming should entail. This is important for academics and policy makers alike concerned with the efforts to revitalise rural and agrarian economies.

1. Introduction

Over the past 15 years, the concept of the 'good farmer' has informed a substantial body of literature addressing the symbolic nature of farming practices (Burton et al., 2021). Burton's seminal article (Burton, 2004) was emblematic of the 'cultural turn' in rural studies and social science more broadly (see Cloke, 1997), which moved away from behavioural research focused on attitudes and values, and into conceptualisation of unconscious socialisation processes and identity formation. The basic premise of the good farmer concept is that farmers gain symbolic capital from demonstrating skilled role performance, which is evident to themselves and other farmers in the visual representations of their practices (e.g. even, single crop fields, Burton et al., 2021). Being seen as a 'good farmer' is thus not about public perception or an objective measure of farming practices, but a distinction made amongst farming peers. Recent literature has demonstrated the utility and breadth of applications for the concept, branching out from its initial orientation towards understanding agri-environmental behaviour (e.g. Burton et al., 2008; Huttunen and Peltomaa, 2016; Saunders, 2016), into organic farm conversion (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland, 2013), livestock husbandry and veterinary practice (Naylor et al., 2018; Shortall et al., 2018), farmer aging and gender relations (Riley, 2016) and into riparian zones (Thomas et al., 2019) and fishing (Gustavsson et al., 2017).

In applied research, the dynamics of being a good farmer are seen as central in models of farmer decision making, particularly in pursuit of understanding why farmers may be resistant to change (e.g. Burton et al., 2008; Burton and Paragahawewa 2011; Riley et al., 2018). In the good farmer literature, farming identity is conceptualised as resilient: symbols of good farming are embedded in long term practices and farm household socialisation (i.e. socialised in childhood and thus transferred between generations). Common symbols include even, weed free fields; healthy, well-conformed livestock; and tidy farmsteads. Loss of ability to demonstrate these symbols – for example through adoption of agri-environmental measures (Burton et al., 2008), transition to part-time farming (Sutherland, 2019) or retirement (Riley, 2016) – has a cultural cost to farmers. Farmers thus resist these transitions, even though the changes may appear to be financially advantageous.

Recent research has demonstrated that these symbols can change over time, through devaluation of existing symbols, reflexivity and adaptation to new 'rules of the game' in farming and associated fields (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland, 2013; Saunders, 2016; Cusworth 2020). Sutherland (2013) argued that good farming symbols are also symbols of profitable farming, demonstrating Bourdieu's 'taste of necessity' Bourdieu (1984): cultural embedded preferences for what is within economic reach of the population (e.g. cheap, high fat foods for those of limited means). Farmers participate in economic 'fields' with associated rules: weed-free fields are evidence of skilled role performance in tillage and pesticide application, but also of higher yields that (historically) led to greater profits. However, when profit margins

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.10.038
Received 18 May 2020; Received in revised form 16 October 2020; Accepted 22 October 2020
Available online 1 November 2020

narrow or the cost of pesticide application outweighs the anticipated yield gain, these symbols lose their value and are renegotiated in order to enable farmers to continue to operate viable farming businesses. Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) demonstrated that when these changing 'rules of the game' become unclear, fragmentation occurs. Farmers actively explore their options, including conversion to organic farming, hobby farming, or intensification. These multiple trajectories reflect the multiple functions of rural land (e.g. production of food and fuel, environmental protection, and recreation/consumption, Holmes, 2012; Wilson, 2007), with larger holdings typically having greater 'room for manoevre' in performing these different functions (Wilson, 2007).

Although Cusworth (2020) mentions that younger farmers tend to have more strongly internalised new environmental 'rules of the game', the change processes described in the literature to date largely reflect alterations to existing, long-held farming symbols (Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012). In this paper we consider how symbols of good farming are initially formed, especially when relative outsiders join a farming a community for the first time, and need to learn these rules. In this paper we pursue this research question through an empirical study of new entrants to crofting (a legally protected form of smallholding in the United Kingdom).

New entrants to farming represent an important cohort for understanding symbolic identity construction because they are actively forming new farming businesses and identities. New entrants have also been recognised as critical to ensuring the innovativeness and resilience of the agricultural sector (Regidor, 2012): the European Commission planned to spend some €9.6 billion on financial aid to young farmers under the age of 41 between 2007 and 2020 (European Court of Auditors, 2017). In the United States, a more modest but still substantial $15–20 million per annum is targeted towards supporting beginning farmers and ranchers.[1] Recent research demonstrates that farms managed by younger farmers are more productive and economically efficient than farms run by older farmers (Zagata and Sutherland, 2015). Sutherland et al. (2015) also found that farms run by new entrants – of any age – were more innovative than farms run by long-term farmers.

To date, the concept of the good farmer has been primarily developed in relation to existing, long term farmers. It is less understood how identity formation works in tandem with farm establishment. Here, the ways that new entrants seek to identify as 'good farmers' may have profound effects on changes to the rural sector. In this paper we apply the 'good farmer' concept to new farm business establishment processes, advancing it through integration with assemblage theory (drawing particularly on DeLanda 2006, 2016). Assemblage theory is now commonly utilised at multiple scales throughout sociology and human geography, as part of the more-than-representational turn in social science more broadly. It has been specifically identified as promising for rural studies (Woods, 2016). Applications to date have addressed commodity chains (e.g. Jones et al., 2019; Le Heron et al., 2013), water cultures (McLean, 2017), and environmental governance (Forney et al., 2018). Bringing assemblage theory to bear on new farm establishment reveals the expressive and material elements required to enter and establish in rural livelihoods. This work provides nuance and complexity to the assumptions policy makers rely upon when they devote state resources to encourage non-farmers to enter the agricultural sector.

Assemblage theory emphasises the more-than-human (e.g. animal, organic, technical, natural) relations which constitute the social (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011), enabling us to explicitly consider the materiality of farming identity construction as a key component of how new farms are formed. It well recognised that farming identity is consubstantial – land, livestock and farm family are mutually constituted through farming practices (Gray, 1998). Van der Ploeg's farming styles (Van der Ploeg, 1994) similarly rest on farming practices and land capabilities of the locale, but analyses of the 'good farmer' remain focused largely on the cognitive and social practices of the farmer. Assemblage thinking provides the tools to ask: how does an individual's developing identity as a farmer influence the shape of their farm? How do the material properties of that farm shape the identity of the new farmer? In this paper we look more closely at the range of actants enrolled in the establishment of new farming businesses in order to demonstrate how the cognitive social practices of new entrants 'do work' in assembling the farm.

2. New farms as assemblages

We develop the good farming concept by integrating assemblage thinking with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic capital – the most common theoretical underpinning for the good farmer literature (Burton et al., 2021). Manuel Delanda's (2006, 2016) work on assemblage shares similar ontological foundations to Bourdieu's conceptualisation, lodged in the logic of practices. The particular advantage of assemblage thinking is the opportunity to consider that disparate entities can hold together, without necessarily forming a coherent whole (Allen, 2011). Assemblage theory emphasises that most elements are part of multiple assemblages (termed 'relations of exteriority') and have agency; configurations are thus constantly changing. As some forces bring the many elements together for a limited time (e.g. emergency response to a crisis, Briassoulis, 2017) assemblages are therefore precarious (Müller, 2015). It is the relations between the elements, rather than the characteristics of the elements themselves, which are particularly important – assemblages are 'arrangements' or collections, from the French term 'agencement', which is important to distinguish from the French term 'assemblage' which suggests a stronger degree of internal organisation (Nail, 2017).

In DeLanda (2006) description of assemblage theory, he conceptualises assemblages as heterogeneous collections of elements which are constantly evolving. The capacity of those elements represents the 'spaces of possibility' for the development and change of the assemblage: mobilising those capacities (e.g. untapped skills or abilities of household members, under-utilised land capacity) enables the assemblage to change. A piece of vacant land, for example, has the capacity to become a landfill site or a small farm, but the outcome depends on the interactions of potential farmers, planning legislation, the land use history and proximity to markets. As Li (2014) comments, it takes considerable work to assemble land into a social form. Given the complexity of assemblages, and recognition of a heterogeneous set of actants, this scope is substantial.

In this paper, we view an agricultural holding as an assemblage, where non-human elements such as soil quality, fencing, infrastructure, crops, animal breeds and regional climate interact with farmers, family members' distribution networks, and neighbouring individuals (Holloway, 2002; Gorman, 2017). Together they produce 'expressive elements' through signage, labour, language, discourse and mission statements. The emergent whole of these interactions is a 'farm', continuously held together by the interplay of all of the assembled elements. Considering *new* farms as assemblages is useful to unlock the relative power of association amongst the component parts, as an exercise to understand what drives the emergence of a farm and associated farmer identity. As a new entrant sets their intention to create a farm, or glue the many parts needed together, an important process of negotiation occurs between the relative agencies of the component parts.

In an assemblage frame, this emergence of a new farm is made up of the co-functioning of an individual farmer (or family of farmers) and the farm's material components across three dimensions: material and expressive components; coding; and territorialising or de-territorialising processes. The material elements of a farm (in this paper a smallholding in Scotland) are comprised of things like the soil, seeds, livestock, wildlife, fencing, equipment and farmhouses. Expressive elements like sentiments, claims of identity and imaginaries are embodied in the

[1] https://nifa.usda.gov/funding-opportunity/beginning-farmer-and-rancher-development-program-bfrdp.

perceptions of farmers, but also through architectural and farm design, business plans, farmer dress and choice of livestock. All material and expressive elements have capacities that are realised or unrealised depending on the composition of the assemblage. For example, wildlife can be a destructive pest or a feature for agritourism and income generation. The choice of producing highland cattle can invoke a perception of hardiness and history or a perception of low productivity. Thus, all components in an assemblage have the capacity for variable roles, exerting different effects depending on how they are expressed. These variable components are given order by their coding: the social discourses that normalise, give meaning and define values. Codes can be asserted internally, through social networks and are often enshrined in law and regulations.

'Territorialisation' is the process through which elements become included or excluded from the 'territory' of the assemblage, defining the extent to which an assemblage is homogenised or distinct in its boundaries. This territorialisation is reinforced through coding. For example, Jones et al. (2019), in their analysis of the Global Wool Assemblage, identified the introduction of laboratory analysis into the British wool industry as important for its enrolment of international buyers. Use of laboratory analysis became informally coded as an expectation of practice, but could be formally coded into legal requirements for commercial transactions. The territorialisation of a farm is evident in the property boundaries that defer ownership, but also the network of neighbours, vets and advisors that lend support and expert advice. A farm is also territorialised by forces at broader geographical scales such as the market channels that themselves depend on consumer habits and agricultural policies. In this paper we specifically consider crofts, a type of small holding coded through a suite of regulations and use restrictions (Sutherland et al., 2014, 2017). The strict rules and use restrictions placed on a croft boundary shapes the relative capacities of the material and expressive elements. 'Deteritorrialisation' is the release of traditional practices or actants from their farming assemblages (e.g. a change in commodities produced, or marketing channels). Farmers do not act alone in these processes: events ranging from market competition to disease outbreaks and severe weather events can remove components from the assemblage. Territorialisation is of particular interest for the establishment of a new farm as a farmer attempts to coax together the many actants, each with their own agency and capacities.

The relative cohesive labour performed by each of these elements is what drives the emergence of a farm. The empirical work of assemblage thinking is to demonstrate the relative power of these elements as a tool to understand why things hold together or fall apart. Although assemblages take as their starting point some form of rupture or set of change events, assemblage theory also recognises the 'historicity' of assemblages: the preceding assemblages from which new assemblages are formed. In one of the few rural sociological studies of assemblage and food systems, Jones et al. (2019) thus draw attention to the moments in which a global wool assemblage was formed. Assemblages are understood as being formed from existing assemblages, which are de-territorialised and territorialised through the actions of and interactions between potentially very disparate actors. The inclusion of non-human actants also emphasises the material context in which assemblages are located. As such, assemblages are context specific, situated historically and evolving through ongoing 'territorialisation' and 'de-territorialisation' processes which establish new rules and routines (DeLanda, 2016). Assemblage thinking thus allows us to ask how the heterogenous elements of a farm are held together.

Emphasis on materiality has made assemblage theory popular with scientists working on human and nature interactions (Müller, 2015), but it is not without critique. Allen, 2011(2011) points out that inclusion of a wide range of actants can lead to endless description, and argues for stronger conceptualisation. Assemblage theory is better for identifying relationships than positing causality. Jones et al., 2019, p. 153) point out that:

> assemblage has value as a research methodology for examining how certain sets of relations come into being, are maintained and can break apart. However, in order to answer questions such as why sheep farmers do what they do and why they might choose to continue to do so, despite the economic hardships experienced by many, requires an explanatory framework based in understandings of cultural, familial and institutional contexts as well as behavioural factors linked to identity formation, intuition and affect.

A drawback in assemblage theory is that it provides little methodological guidance in how to empirically draw out the codes that define how territorialised a group of heterogenous elements has come together. Jones et al. thus follow Müller (2015) to argue that assemblage can usefully be integrated with other social theories. In this paper, integrating Bourdieusian concepts of capital accumulation and exchange with assemblage thinking thus offers the potential to better understand farmer identity construction within the context of new farm assembly formation. The application of such concepts such as fields, habitus and capital, have allowed some assemblage theorists to better understand intent of actors within an assemblage, which is otherwise lacking (Bureš et al., 2015).

The utility of Bourdieu's approach is the conceptualisation of symbolic capital relations and how they are developed. We utilise the Bourdieu (1986) conceptualisation of capital exchange to offer insights into the social and cultural processes through which assemblages are held together. Bourdieu argued that symbolic capital is built and transferred through family and societal socialisation processes (including formal education), and practical engagement in different 'fields' of interaction. Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between social, cultural and economic capitals, all of which can be reduced to labour and are thus (to a degree) interchangeable. Social capital is the networks of social connections and mutual obligations; economic capital is material and financial property; and cultural capital is prestige and the ability to recognise and accurately value cultural symbols (ibid). Through the 'habitus' – an internalised, largely unconscious disposition to act – different types of capital can be valued and exchanged with others (e.g. social capital can be utilised to access economic capital, Swartz 1997). Bourdieu conceptualised 'fields' as areas of production characterised by the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate different types of capital (Swartz 1997, p.117). In assemblage speak, these 'rules of the game' are the codes under which assemblages operate. The habitus thus embodies the 'codes' or 'rules of the game' for practicing in particular fields. In relation to farming, for example, farmers who are expressing social norms (e.g. appreciation for the achievement of even, weed free fields) are expressing informal 'codes' of practice. This code demonstrates the rules of the game (e.g. that farmers with higher levels of social and cultural capital are more likely to be able to borrow expensive machinery from their neighbours, Sutherland and Burton, 2011).

DeLanda (2006) identified the consistencies between his conceptualisation of material and expressive capacities, and Bourdieu's conceptualisations of economic and cultural capital. Where he noted a deviation was in Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus. Delanda argued that while valid - habits and skills are important in assemblage theory – Bourdieu's emphasis on the automatism of the habitus, treating it as a 'master process', goes too far. For DeLanda (2006), adherence to this internal disposition to act must be accounted for in terms of specific enforcement mechanisms; symbolic capitals must be lodged in actual people and processes. As such, for Delanda, the forces that territorialise social class are considerably more contingent and precarious than Bourdieu posits. This more flexible use of the habitus is consistent with recent work on the good farmer concept, which demonstrate the re-negotiation of good farming symbols in response to changing 'rules of the game' (e.g. Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Thomas et al., 2019; Cusworth, 2020).

The Bourdieu (1986, 1984) conceptualisation is embedded in his

'logic of practices', which emphasises that it is through practical actions (in this case, physically performing farming activities) that symbols develop and are reinforced. Although skills and tastes are socialised in childhood, the habitus is further developed through interactions in specific social and geophysical contexts: livestock farmers are likely to value similar symbols, which may differ from symbols valued by producers of other commodities. This points to the materialities of good farming construction. Thomas et al. (2019), in an initial study of the materiality of 'good farming' argued that rivers bring mess onto otherwise tidy farming landscapes, and are thus excluded the farmer's definition of the farm. They also argue that some areas of the farm are more conducive to demonstrating good farming than others (i.e. have stronger expressive capacity). Here, we build on the rich understanding of the 'the good farmer' to bring depth to the coding of farmer identity and role it plays in the establishment of new farm assemblages.

3. Methods

With a few exceptions (e.g. McGuire et al., 2013), studies of the 'good farmer' utilise qualitative research methods: primarily qualitative interviewing but also participant observation (e.g. Stock, 2007). Assemblage theory lacks an established empirical methodology. Jones et al. (2019) follow Baker and McGuirk (2017, p. 433), who identify three potential foci: adopting an ethnographic sensibility; tracing sites and situations; and revealing labours of assembling. These approaches are evident in rurally-based studies of assemblage to date (e.g. Jones et al., 2019; Le Heron et al., 2013). In this study we seek to compare new croft holdings as assemblages, focusing primarily on the labours of assembling individual crofts. New entrant crofts are somewhat unusual and are therefore geographically dispersed, making it difficult to track all of their networks directly. Although new entrants to crofting often are familiar with others in their regions, we found no evidence that they form a cohesive network. We thus focus on the relations and territorialisation practices of establishing the croft as described by the new crofters themselves, triangulated through key informant interviews.

The data utilised in this paper is drawn from a larger study of new entrants to crofting, which focused more broadly on how they accessed new knowledge and advice. The importance of 'good crofting' identity emerged early in the study and was included in the question guide. Data for this paper comprises qualitative interviews with 25 new entrants to farming and 9 key informants (totalling 28 interviews, as 6 interviews were conducted with crofting couples), in the west coast of Scotland (islands of Skye, Lewis and Harris). To increase the heterogeneity of respondents, entry to the study sites was facilitated from two distinct points: the Scottish Crofting Federation (the crofting membership association) and SAC Consulting (the single largest provider of agricultural advice to farmers and crofters in Scotland). Representatives of these organisations also acted as key informants, supplemented by interviews with a crofting regulator, community estate manager and an advisor from a wildlife trust who described the position of new crofters within wider crofting communities.

As Zagata and Sutherland (2015) demonstrated, there is considerable inconsistency in the definition of new entrants: EU subsidies conflate new entrants with sole holders of farming businesses who are under the age of 41. It is also not straightforward to distinguish successors to crofts from newcomers to crofting, as succession may occur through extended family connections, and those who do not inherit a croft typically have a degree of experience with farming or smallholding prior to making the decision to acquire a croft. The definition of 'new entrants' for this research therefore included successors to croft holdings. However, following Sutherland et al. (2015), where it was found that new entrants could be of any age, the decision was taken to include new entrants of all ages. The research thus included as 'new entrants' households which had established new croft enterprises within the preceding 15 years. New entrant businesses frequently take several years to establish or 'territorialise', as newcomers spend early years building housing and working off-croft to build up sufficient capital to invest in their businesses.

Study participants included 21 men and 13 women, and ranged in age from 17 to 66. Educational achievement ranged from secondary to school to advanced degrees (e.g. in medicine). Croft holdings ranged in size from 1 ha to 20 ha, with access to several hundred hectares of common grazing land in many cases. As is common in qualitative research, participants represented a purposive sample (Creswell, 1998), selected to represent as wide a range of new entrant experiences as possible (e.g. new entrants of a range of ages, holding sizes, educational achievement, previous experience of crofting and duration on their present croft). This breadth of experiences is important to ensure that concepts developed from the empirical cases are relevant to a wide range of cases (Fusch and Ness, 2015).

Interviews were approximately 45 min to 1 hour in length. The interview guide specifically asked study participants to describe people they considered to be 'good crofters' and the type of croft they would like to emulate. Other questions included: why they decided to become crofters; how they acquired the croft; changes made since acquiring the croft; vision for the future of the croft; access to advice and training; and demographic characteristics of the interviewee (age, tenure, gender). Key informants were asked for their insights into this set of issues, based on their interactions with crofters more broadly. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, entered into NVivo software, coded to reflect the interview questions. Direct quotations from study participants are included in this paper utilising pseudonyms to identify gender but maintain anonymity.

3.1. Historicity of crofting

Both assemblage theory and good farming concepts emphasise the historicity of current processes. Crofting is a highly codified form of small-scale farming, located in the highlands and islands of Scotland (i.e. located on remote, often poor-quality land). Contemporary crofts average approximately 5 ha in size, not including access to shared hill grazing land (Scottish Crofting Federation, 2020). Early crofts were – and often still are – small-scale pieces of land controlled by large-scale land owners – initially clan chiefs and from the mid-1700s lairds of landed estates (Willis, 1991). Early crofts were allocated to tenants in reward for their fealty and service to the landowner. As such, they have traditionally been part-time and oriented primarily towards self-provisioning. Legal protections to crofting have developed over the past 150 years to provide security of tenure and the opportunity to purchase crofts outright. The protections have advanced to such a degree that contemporary crofts are colloquially understood to be 'a small piece of land completely surrounded by legislation' (Shucksmith and Ronningen, 2011) – a surprisingly DeLandian sentiment demonstrating how strongly crofts are coded at croft community and national levels. Crofting is governed by a designated Crofting Commission.

There are over 17,700 crofts in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Scottish Crofting Federation, 2019). Like farms, crofts are traditionally managed by families and inherited rather than sold; tenancies are also commonly passed between generations. As is characteristic of other small-scale holdings (see Zagata and Sutherland, 2015; Davidova et al., 2013) crofts are more likely to be occupied by older, less commercially oriented farmers. The strong family traditions of crofting, in combination with often scenic locations, have made them desirable to tourist markets and as second homes. Recent legal reforms to crofting legislation have aimed to combat absentee ownership and *de facto* land abandonment by ensuring that croft land is actively managed by local occupiers. Crofters who do not occupy or work their land risk having it seized by the government, although this is unusual. However, under Scotland's contemporary land reform processes, the region has seen a number of successful bids for community ownership of land, whereby the community has taken ownership from former estate owners, through mutual negotiation.

Crofts are clearly lodged in space – defined by holding boundaries, which frequently include access to shared collective grazing. There are strongly established regulations and norms around utilisation of collective grazing lands, embedding crofters within community-based assemblages. However, traditional crofting in the study site has been undergoing processes of de-territorialisation for decades, as the growth of national meat assemblages benefited more centrally located farms, and those with more productive land. The primary agricultural activities on crofts have traditionally been extensive beef and sheep production, with lambs sent to market at 6–9 months of age, and calves sent to lowland Scotland to fatten. The de-coupling of agricultural subsidies from production in 2005, shifting first to an historic payment, and then in 2015 to area-based payments, had made it progressively less viable to produce the traditional crofting commodities. The 'loss of sheep from the hills' following 2005 Common Agricultural Policy Reforms is well documented in Scotland (Sutherland et al., 2014; Scottish Agricultural College, 2008). As livestock numbers dropped, so did the numbers of people available to participate in shared management of collective grazing, and the number of young people taking over crofts. Livestock, when they were held, came to be managed primarily on 'in-bye' land (the land solely owned or tenanted by the croft household); common grazing land became under-utilised and often abandoned in the study sites.

4. Findings

The new entrants in this study uniformly identified their decision to establish or take over a croft as an active choice, as distinct from longer term crofters who may have felt they had few other opportunities. Within this choice, 'lifestyle' was highly important – crofting was not recognised as a lucrative activity, and with the exception of a few croft successors, was not approached as a fulltime job. The decision to croft was a decision to pursue a specific lifestyle, including residency on the croft land, within a (remote) rural area.

4.1. Accessing land

Analysis of an assemblage typically begins at the point of rupture from previous assemblages – as heterogeneous, evolving entities, this point is inevitably somewhat arbitrary. For the purposes of this paper we consider the acquisition of land to be the starting point of the new croft assemblage, establishing the physical location and boundaries of the croft, although the idealised imaginaries of croft life which inspire land access develop several years before this point.

Access to land is routinely identified as the single largest barrier to new entrants to farming in Europe, although this varies by region (EIP AgriFocus Group New Entrants Final Report, 2016; Zagata et al., 2017). Land in the study site is difficult to access for several reasons: crofts are primarily transferred within families, there is low incentive to sell, there is limited public advertising of available land, and it is challenging to navigate the complexity of crofting legislation. Land in remote regions is largely disconnected from mainstream commercial agricultural land markets, owing to accessibility issues and typically low values for production. As also argued by Moragues-Faus (2014) in southern Europe, the small-scale of the crofts typically gives them limited economic value, but very high social value. There is often little financial incentive to sell the croft or tenancy rights; the exceptions are in accessible, scenic areas for gentrifiers, where small croft holdings can sell for hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Crofting is a code – in the first instance a legal distinction – which encompasses a particular scale, location and production practices of land holding. Coding land in this way is central to defining the 'field' of agriculture as it pertains to crofts. Study participants described their access to land as involving lengthy processes of negotiation. There were numerous legal hurdles - particularly for those unfamiliar with crofting legislation - to navigate.

> Joseph: But it can be a daunting for new entrants coming into crofting and if they're not familiar with what it's about it can be very daunting because of the legislation, you hear scare stories about how strict they're becoming and making sure that you're being productive on it. And the legislation changes all the time …

Purchasing of a croft or tenancy rights requires evidencing fit with crofting standards (e.g. that the croft will be occupied on a full-time basis and worked). For the successors in the study who directly inherited their crofts, the process of transfer took a number of years and was typically the result of decades of expectation. The prospective crofter is a central element of the croft, one which expresses his or her (household's) suitability and skills to bring together a croft assemblage. This is achieved through labour: working on the croft and residing in the local area demonstrates credibility and develops social capital. Several of the study participants accessed their crofts through family members (e.g. uncles who had no children). In those cases, accessing the croft similarly involved investment of labour by non-residents (i.e. spending holidays visiting the croft and helping with farming activities), investing labour in the croft itself.

Being physically present in the crofting area was an important material property. New entrants described how their croft had not been formally advertised:

> Marion: Alex's got family connections here; his mother was born next door. He's been coming up here since he was a little boy.

> Alex: And the connection here was not so much that we were looking here particularly but that a cousin of mine here was able to tell me that this croft was for sale so that was what led us here.

An informal rule or code of crofting is that properties are typically passed between local residents, rather than formally advertised. For those who were new to the area (or crofting in general), relocation opened up social capital avenues through which they learned of crofts that may be accessible. Physically moving to and residing in the locality also factored in access – for those who had local family, this demonstrated the commitment to residence within the local community. Complete newcomers found it possible to access a croft with the assistance of an estate agent, but this was rare amongst study participants. Key informants described a waiting list of several hundred prospective crofters held by the Scottish Crofting Federation.

Although accessing crofts was sometimes identified as expensive for locals, this was primarily related to the house – as the land was typically poor quality, the land itself was not that expensive, particularly for newcomers who had substantial equity in their previous housing. The major cost associated was the resultant labour (sacrifice of urban employment) and ongoing investment in infrastructure and buildings to refurbish the crofts. Territorialisation processes thus involved social capital invested in family ties, and economic capital invested in the land and legal advice. Through the process of accessing their croft land, new crofters were made aware – if they had not been before – of the strong legal coding surrounding crofting.

4.2. Interactions between elements

Once the croft land was secured, new entrants continued to invest considerable labour to territorialise the croft. This makes it important to position neighbour relations – key in 'good farming' analysis – within assemblage terms.

Neighbours were important to new entrants for multiple reasons. First, they were important sources of information on local practices: revealing the material properties of key elements, particularly land. Neighbours could identify what had been produced on the croft in the past.

> Joseph: … they also had some knowledge of what used to be grown on the croft, it's been sort of passed down so they knew that this

particular area grew … they used to have oats, and carrots, and potatoes in the past and …

Nathan: Yeah where the market garden … is … the soil there is 3–4 spades deep.

Joseph and Nathan identified the location for their new market garden on the basis of their neighbour's knowledge of the previous garden, which was buried under grasses and indistinguishable from the rest of their land, but had good quality soil which had been improved by previous owners. Information on local practices was also important for tacit knowledge of livestock husbandry, and what had been successfully attepted (or not) in the local area. Owing to considerable regional variation in land capability, several study participants were dismissive of the advice given by professional agricultural advisors from outside of the area, relying instead on neighbour knowledge to determine the stocking and productive capability of their land (for further detail on knowledge networks, see Sutherland et al., 2017

Second, in communities where the common grazing land was still in collective use, neighbours were important sources of labour: neighbours formed material elements within the assemblage, which were integrated through social capital. Study participants estimated that active users of the common grazing lands collectively gathered livestock five times a year, a process involving both people and trained dogs. Without a critical mass of locals to gather livestock, pasturing livestock on the common grazing became unfeasible for all. Purchase of a croft or tenancy with active common grazing use thus enabled access to the social capital and associated labour of other common grazing holders. This social capital could be actively increased by investing in skill development (cultural capital). For example, one new entrant purchased and trained two sheep dogs, gaining not only the favour of his local grazing committee, but part-time employment with other collective grazing groups (i.e. integration into other local assemblages, as well as economic capital). Neighbours were also identified as important sources of emergency assistance. Respondents described an implied moral contract for the care of livestock. Neighbours were expected to help in emergencies, such as when livestock went astray (e.g. onto roads, or stuck in bogs), consistent with Sutherland and Burton (2011).

Third, neighbours were important sources of local cultural capital: they are key deliverers of the expressive elements that are coded as the 'normal' agricultural practices in the local area. It is well established in the good farming literature that cultural capital – what it means to be a 'good farmer' – is reinforced through the comments and observations of local farmers (Burton et al., 2021). Katherine described how people at the 'fank' (local livestock processing facilities where vaccinations, sorting of livestock by owner etc occur) told apocryphal stories of other crofters, describing their failed practices:

Stories are a great learning source, the stories about when they, the tittle-tattle and the gossip about oh so and so had some sheep and they did this with them, imagine doing that, that's, you just don't do that!

Katherine's husband Michael went on to describe how neighbours had explained that sheep which had received high prices at the local auction were unsuited to the hill ground of the crofter who purchased them, and were therefore likely to die. In doing so, those neighbours expressed the expectations of 'good crofters' in their region, reflecting both tacit knowledge and the associated disapproval of neighbours for pursuing practices which were detrimental to livestock health (i.e. the coding processes for local crofting assemblages). Neighbouring farmers were particularly critical of the innovations made by new entrants, often seeing these as poorly informed. Loss of the local fank – resulting from the loss of active crofters and associated critical mass for collective actions in several of the study locales - thus represented both a loss of labour and a loss of the mechanisms which reinforced specific symbols and competencies of 'good crofting'. Processes of de-territorialising in crofting areas had removed both crofts and the various capitals of associated crofters from these communities.

Access to day-to-day assistance and advice varied considerably amongst study participants. This appeared to reflect (in part) the respect given to neighbours' knowledge, and the opportunity to invest in social capital. Some respondents described how neighbours were reluctant to provide advice to newcomers, apparently on the basis that the neighbours, themselves, had had to learn through hard-won experience. Others described how the provision of practical assistance – particularly through skilled participation in gathering from the common grazing – earned them access to advice and day-to-day assistance. In these latter cases, investment of labour led directly to cultural capital accrual, enabling them to enrol their neighbours within their croft assemblage.

4.3. *Establishing new 'good crofting' identities'*

While new entrants respected their neighbours' expertise in the practicalities of livestock husbandry (e.g. lambing, feeding, breeding), and relied on the social capital of their local communities for labour, territorialising their croft typically involved rejecting the approaches of many of those neighbours to business management. This rejection was justified on the basis of lack of skilled role performance, particularly the low level of activity on neighbouring crofts, many of which were *de facto* abandoned, or operating with very little input. In areas where some crofters had sought to achieve economies of scale, criticism was levelled at resultant environmental degradation, unhealthy livestock, or the perceived inevitability of financial losses from continuing to focus solely on the traditional crofting commodities of cattle and sheep production.

This identification of neighbouring crofters as 'bad crofters' by both newcomers and successors reflects the distinction between socialised expectations of crofting gained during childhood, and the need to respond to changing 'rules of the game' as adults operating crofts. The deterritorialization of crofting through economic decline had weakened the value of symbolic values traditionally associated with crofting: quality cattle and sheep production. These symbols remained critical to established crofters, but new entrants questioned their value.

Dennis: From what I can see most people [who] use their crofts, they're stock people, and there is a sense that you're not a proper crofter if you [have got] … no beasts, no cattle, and actually you're just faffing around with little plants.

Dennis, an *ex novo* newcomer to crofting, was well aware that his actions were being questioned by his crofting neighbours, and was no doubt a source of gossip at the fank – but he would have had no need to engage with crofters at the fank as he did not keep livestock. He heard the negative comments about his croft management as a community resident. In the eyes of Monica, who had inherited her croft, the problem with established approaches was that they were out of step with contemporary rules of the game:

Monica: I think in my particular area there's only 3 [crofters] and, they're all traditional really …. it's like stepping into a time warp it's absolutely fascinating …. But there's no, in my area I don't know of anyone diversifying, sort of going forward into modern, more modern thinking.

Monica had spent several years developing a profession in an urban environment. The major distinction between new entrant successors and *ex novo* newcomers to crofting was the childhood socialisation into established crofting practices; like newcomers, successors frequently had off-croft experience or training which they integrated into their plans for their croft venture. For Monica, 'modern' thinking involved diversifying the croft business, retaining the production of livestock and sheep, but developing a more diversified use of the land-base (e.g. market gardening, tourist accommodation), exploiting the 'spaces of possibility' of traditional crofting elements.

All of the new entrants in the study positioned themselves as "revitalising" their new croft, "bringing it back into production" and seeing it "coming back to life", expressing this ambition through a variety of differing approaches. Successors to crofts were more likely to produce the traditional commodities of cattle and sheep, but like *ex novo* new entrants also sought to re-territorialise the historical crofting assemblage by developing the 'expressive capacities' of their land and integrating new elements through business diversification.

The process of forming and reforming crofting identity was consistent with the mechanism of 'roadside farming' identified by Burton (2004) – looking over the fence to assess the quality of their crofting production – but it was not limited to direct neighbour observation.

> Nathan: Somethings are free. We went out to Orkney for instance … and it was quite interesting to see … that's the kind of thing we probably miss the most here is -
>
> Joseph: Looking over the fence!
>
> Nathan: Yeah! Yeah! I mean I don't want to sound insulting but you're not going to learn a great deal by looking over the fence [around here], it depends on the fence!

Study respondents identified the lack of suitable neighbours to emulate, drawing instead on examples from further afield (the Orkney islands are located to the north of the Scottish mainland, two hundred miles from the study site). They also identified the importance of shows and sales to establishing their standards: the remote location of their crofts often meant that there were limited opportunities to view neighbours' livestock, whereas sales gave ample opportunity for visual observation, augmented by financial information (the value achieved at auction) and tempered by commentary from other crofters present. The codes evidenced at these venues served to demonstrate the 'rules of the game' by which crofters needed to act and which shaped the formation of symbols of good crofting for new entrants.

Participants in the study also distinguished themselves from farmers, who were understood as pursuing economies of scale (i.e. by intensifying their production). This aim was expressed by two of the successors, and favoured by crofting advisors (who made their living advising farmers), but typically dismissed by other successors and newcomers as unsuited to the land capability of local crofts. Livestock production on crofts was described as distinctive:

> Linda: the big difference between crofting and farming is that crofting is a way, a pastoralist way of raising animals rather than a farming way. And it's also much less individualistic than farming, if you've got livestock on thousands of acres even if you've got a wonderful dog you have to go out with your neighbours to find them.

Linda emphasised the pastoral basis of crofting, a reflection of the type of land on which it is performed, and the cultural practices of collective gathering. Livestock production within her crofting assemblage thus included neighbours and extensive grazing. For Brian, crofting was always intended to be a part-time activity:

> Brian: I think we've got to go back to the more crofting mindset, multi skilled mindset that people used to have, you'd have crofters, there would be fishermen, there would be Harris Tweed weavers. Today you can do the same thing, you can be a crofter, one of my mates is a crofter, he's a postman, and he's a weaver. He makes a pretty good living out of doing that. I could do the same, I could be a crofter/TV presenter you know.

Brian and Monica emphasised that crofting should be pluriactive, involving assemblages of elements not traditionally grouped together on contemporary farms. In seeking to revitalise their crofts the new entrants in the study drew on the longer history of crofting as part-time and pluriactive, utilising this history to justify their diversification into new markets and activities. These ideals expressed by the study participants fitted closely with those embedded in crofting legislation: that crofts should be occupied on a full-time basis and that crofts should be productive. Although lifestyle choice was the primary consideration for establishing a new croft, study participants were unanimous that crofts should generate an income, if not at present, then once the new businesses were established.

The resultant 'good crofter' identity described was eclectic – diverse assemblages all termed 'new entrant crofts'. When asked to identify 'good crofters' in the area, and the type of crofter they might seek to emulate, study participants identified different people for each of their activities:

> James: There isn't a model croft […], that probably goes to our vision. I mean we can see two or three crofters who are probably more specialising in an area that we would like to get to: a chappie down the road who's got his market garden business so he's very efficient and effective, and doing good produce so we like the way that he's working things so that's a good model and then, closer neighbours it's the way they manage the sheep as well so, and what have they in the sheep, but bringing them altogether we haven't seen that model croft have we. What we want to achieve between the sort of, the market garden, the livestock, and I guess the holiday business as well that we have so, bringing all those three together.

For James, there was a local market gardener, and a local sheep producer who he would emulate, but he looked further afield for someone who offered excellent holiday accommodation. Both of his examples demonstrated the importance of skilled role performance to his assessment: producing 'good produce' and 'managing sheep well' were visible symbols which he could assess. He described these crofters as specialists, experts in the activities he wished to perform on his croft. His vision is to integrate into three different assemblages and 'rules of the game' into his croft, thus developing a hybrid identity which he has yet to observe on another holding. This negotiation took place iteratively within the spaces of possibilities of the elements of their holdings, which we turn to next.

4.4. Actants in assemblage

Assemblage theory draws attention to the particular roles of non-human actants in assemblage processes. The marginal nature of croft land in the study site, and its remote location, made it an important actant in the establishment of a croft. Although neighbours were not necessarily examples of good crofting, they were sources of information and often photos of earlier productivity levels, particularly important in cases where the land had been abandoned for decades:

> Ben: … if [neighbour's name] is right and these fields were all full of barley and oats in the summer 50 years ago there's no reason why they shouldn't be full of barley and oats now. And the difference is that the people in Switzerland are doing stuff that they were doing 50 years ago and the way they've set up the economy has allowed them to continue doing that whereas here it's gone into decline. … Here you're looking at 2 or 3 generations of things going downhill, but you know, the Swiss picture is a nice one to try and aspire to … The guys down the fank talk about thousands of sheep at one time.

In addition to their function in reproducing cultural capital, the 'guys down at the fank' thus have a role in preserving knowledge of crofting heritage. What is notable here is that in establishing their expectations for their crofts, new crofters drew on information about local practices several decades ago, and current practices far outside of their locales, with examples ranging from elsewhere in the UK, to Switzerland and South Africa. Their crofts were not seen as blank canvasses, or limited to their current land capability. They territorialised historic practices, drawing on imaginaries from the local past, and contemporary images of smallholdings from further afield. Photos of the past had often been

accessed, which gave the new entrants hope that the land could be restored to that capacity. The new crofters also drew on a variety of other visual materials, particularly books, the internet and visits to other crofts and farms.

New crofters undertook an iterative process of croft development through which their idealised imaginaries of croft life were renegotiated as they learned about their land capability.

> Gabe: when we first came into it, it was really the horticulture we were keen -
>
> Rebekah: Yeah it was more growing than livestock. I mean we've always had hens and we got pigs in to clear some of the garden ground to make our beds and that was quite an experience, that I don't think I'd repeat! [Laughter] …
>
> Gabe: Especially in our kind of wet winters where the ground under the pigs just turns to slush, it just turns to soup when you go into feed them and stuff, you're up to the top of your wellies and the pigs are all over you so. If there's a gale blowing it's not great is it? … we developed an interest in Dexters didn't we? They're a small breed [of cattle] … they're a good dual-purpose cow for milk and beef.
>
> Rebekah: But we don't milk.
>
> Gabe: We haven't started milking … we had really wanted to be milking when we got them but we just haven't been able to get it together with facilities and stuff yet.

Gabe and Rebekah moved to the study site from a smallholding in England, where they had hens. Their intention was to develop a market garden, but instead they found themselves experimenting with different types of livestock, learning through direct experiences which livestock suited their property. Newcomers to crofting quickly learned that small breeds of cattle and hardy sheep were more successful than 'softer' breeds more common in the south. Deer were a risk to outdoor vegetables in some areas, foxes to poultry in others. In territorialising their crofts, participants were also keen to move away from traditional meat production approaches; integration into national meat assemblages had clearly not been successful for current crofters, and was deemed of limited potential. Instead, new crofters aimed to revitalise self-provisioning and local food sales, reintroducing a range of livestock and food crops, thus opting out of the established 'rules of the game' and into a new markets.

Through this territorialisation process, new crofters iteratively established the symbols and practices they valued as evidence of skilled role performance. Linda described the difference between expectations of livestock care from her smallholding in Kent (southern England), where a 'proper shepherd' checked his sheep every day and could immediately identify health problems.

> Linda: it was a completely different way of looking, of having sheep because in Kent, the Kentish way is 'lookering': you look at your sheep every day. A proper shepherd would look at this sheep [and] he or she could [see] straightaway if everyone was well and if there were any problems, and how things were. … last night we put the boys on the islands but the girls once they're weaned they stay most of the first winter around the croft … I do still like to look at them but that's not because they need 'lookering' it's because I like to look at them!

Linda's skills in livestock health evaluation were unchanged by her relocation to the study site, but her expectations of 'lookering' required adjustment to the practicalities of extensive livestock grazing. In her case, this involved putting the male sheep out onto an island for the summer, where they would seldom be seen by their keepers. She found personal satisfaction in 'lookering' at her ewes, but she came to recognise this practice as unnecessary – a leisure activity rather than the essential performance she had once deemed it to be.

The meaning of skilled role performance was also negotiated in relation to their farm diversification activities. Two primary innovations adopted by new entrants were polytunnels and tourist accommodation. Polytunnels enabled the production of a wider range and volume of fruits and vegetables than were previously thought possible. Although to outsiders, polytunnels do not appear particularly innovative, it is only with recent technology and the development of substantive shelters than polytunnels have become viable in the case study climate – high winds in particular put the tunnels at risk. Skill in establishing trees as shelter thus became identified as important for emulation: Betty identified a neighbour who had successfully established sheltering trees as an "absolute inspiration" for their crofting activities. Polytunnel production was experimental and primarily oriented towards self-provisioning, but a number of new entrants had also identified this as a form of croft diversification, for direct sales to local farmers markets and restaurants. They were thus engaged in relocalising food assemblages, although typically outside of their villages and involving other newcomers to the region, rather than their immediate neighbours.

Tourist accommodation was developed in the form of bed and breakfast, within the croft holding or in bespoke buildings constructed for that purpose. Brandth and Haugen (2011) demonstrated that as farmers developed agri-tourism enterprises, their identities shifted to become hybrid, reflecting engagement and role performance in multiple fields. In pursuing tourism, new crofters engaged in regional and national tourism assemblages, hosting visitors from outside the locale. New crofters invested in their own idealised way of life could easily see the demand from tourists for similar experiences, territorialising these as new elements in their crofts. They sold not only accommodation but the way of life – the poultry, livestock etc were understood as part of their lifestyle and also an attraction for visitors, who paid to stay on a 'real' croft (in line with contemporary UK back-to-the land movements described by Halfacree, 2011). In essence, the new crofters commodified their own imagination of the crofting codes, to sell to visitors. This connected them to broader tourism markets/assemblages, in Bourdieusian terms new fields and rules of the game.

5. Discussion

New entrants represent an important cohort for the development of agriculture in Europe and North America. In this paper we have considered a specific type of new entrant – those who establish new smallholdings in remote areas. Although the historic practices of crofting and its regulatory context make this a relatively unique population, findings have relevance more broadly. The European Commission's EIP Agri Focus Group on New Entrants to Farming (EIP AgriFocus Group New Entrants Final Report, 2016) found that *ex novo* new entrants are more likely to establish small holdings and alternative enterprises, such as direct marketing. This reflects in part the challenge of accessing land, and the need to generate premium prices from the small-scale properties accessible to them. Moreover, small-scale farming in remote regions is common in Europe's periphery (Guiomar et al., 2018). Study participants also share similarities with contemporary 'back-to-the-land' movement participants (Halfacree, 2006, 2007). While much research focuses on the rural economics and farm policy that condition the potential for rural renewal, our research focuses on the role of cultural capital, history and non-human actants in shaping farm formation and trajectories. Adding these dimensions increases understanding of the establishment and persistence of bodies in rural spaces, which may strengthen policy approaches to rural renewal.

The analysis advances the rural studies literature in several important ways. First, by integrating assemblage and good farming concepts, the study has demonstrated the viability of Bourdiesian mechanisms of capital exchange for understanding territorialisation processes. Social and cultural capitals are developed and exchanged through labour, enabling the territorialisation of new crofting assemblages. The findings demonstrate the importance of crofting identity construction as a force

that iteratively brings together the elements of a smallholding. The persistent coding that normalises crofting practice is a powerful connective force that enrols many pieces of the croft assemblage. To establish their croft, crofters must engage with the established 'field' of crofting, in order to gain access to the traditional sources of markets, social networks, and neighbourly support. Bourdieu (1986, 1984) conceptualisation is particularly useful for thinking through historicity and how the legacy of previous ways of working and culturally accepted 'rules of the game' are enacted. New crofters draw on the historicity of their croft – evident in photos and stories of the 'men at the fank' - as well as crofting legislation, to code their idealised future trajectories of their crofts.

In applications of assemblage theory to new domains, researchers are tasked with doing empirical work to understand how heterogenous actants are held together and where the nodes of agency lie in forming territories of a coherent whole. This study demonstrates that Bourdieusian concepts provide a ready suite of analytical frames and methods to draw from, sharpening the use of assemblage theory in agricultural contexts. Here, they guided researchers in identifying powerful codes that shape an assemblage. Similar applications of social theory could yield results for researchers hoping to apply assemblage theory elsewhere.

In relation to the good farmer conceptualisation, the case study demonstrates how good farmer identity is formed in areas of strong de-territorialisation, and the development of multifunctional good farmer identities, further nuancing the processes of identity formation for newcomers to farming, and highlighting the materialities of good farmer identity formation. In the good farming literature to date, farming has been strongly coded: the materials assembled and their capacities are fairly limited and predictable. Social codes often act as a form of discipline, which shape human behaviour along prescribed dimensions. Thus, we could have expected that strongly coded material and expressive elements in crofting communities and regulations would lead to path dependency for new croft formation. Instead, findings demonstrate the processes through which new entrants reject the status quo in their crofting communities and re-territorialise their crofts. For the new entrants in the study, the successive de-territorialisation of crofting through low commodity prices and land abandonment opened up 'spaces of possibility' for new crofting assemblages to emerge, in line with the erosion of symbols of cultural capital identified by Sutherland (2013) and Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012). In seeking to revitalise their croft holdings, study participants opted to engage in new fields, which operated under different rules. However, in reflection of the strong legal and social coding of the term 'croft', they sought to justify their approaches as consistent with longer histories of crofting (i.e. that crofting historically had been part-time and pluriactive). Although newcomers who did not inherit crofts appeared more flexible in their interpretation of the crofting 'code', all of the new entrants in the study argued that it was important to change established practices if crofting was to survive. The root of the 'good crofter' identity remained strongly reinforced through legislation requiring that crofts should be actively worked. It was the precise nature of the concept of 'croft work' which was contested by newcomers to the crofting 'field'.

Findings thus point to the role and fluidity of legislation in establishing or reinforcing definitions of 'good crofting'. Burton's early work (Burton, 2004, Burton et al., 2008), also based on Scottish case study research, emphasised strongly coded regions: relatively uniform farming structures, where farmers within a locale produced the same commodities and thus held consistent symbols and definitions of good farming based around those commodities. Although this relative homogeneity in approach appears to have been the case for crofting in the past, the deterritorialization of crofting through lack of financial viability over the course of decades opened the doors for a much broader expression of what it is to croft. It appears that the symbols of 'good crofting' held by longer term crofters did indeed lead to resistance to change, but new entrants contested these boundaries through diversification of crofting activities. Social constructivists demonstrate how legal notions of property have always been aligned with the promotion of socially valued economic activity (Sax, 1993), suggesting that while land use restrictions may encourage a particular agricultural form, they can be interpreted fluidly to match economic activity. In this way, new entrants, who may represent the future persistence of the crofting lifestyle, have considerable power in shaping legal interpretation of such terms as "working the land".

Findings confirm the mechanisms of good farmer or good crofter identity construction identified in the literature. Although definitions of 'good crofting' do not appear contingent on a local cohort of farming peers, as has been the case in other applications, findings confirm the importance of roadside farming (Burton, 2004) and farming events such as auctions as locations of skilled role performance and evaluation (Burton et al., 2021). Farmer identity and farm are mutually constituted (Gray, 1998). Consistent with Thomas et al. (2019), landscape elements are selectively embedded into farmer identities. Findings also demonstrate that cultural capital can lead to social capital, and vice versa, often through conversion to labour (consistent with Sutherland and Burton, 2011): newcomers to crofting learn skills in animal husbandry through interactions with neighbours. Labour invested in collective gathering produces social capital, which can also increase access to cultural capital. Interestingly, purchase of a croft or tenancy also appears to include access to local social capital. Flanigan and Sutherland (2016) found that purchasing membership in a machinery ring engendered the purchase of social capital; formalisation of social capital in machinery rings provided low risk access to what had been a locally shared resource in early decades. In the present study, the social norms surrounding common grazings and the practical requirements of utilising these vast areas of land gave direct access to social capital for newcomers to crofting, if their associated grazing committee and fank were operational.

Findings thus draw attention to implications of lack of a farming community. Insufficient numbers of human and animal bodies to collectively graze not only led to a deterioration in the productive capability of the land, but the reinforcement mechanisms and cultural heritage embodied in the 'men at the fank' - who could pass on tacit knowledge and the key elements of good crofter identity - were also lost. The assemblage lost one of its most important forces. What remained were the historicity of land and the crofting legislation. Thus, crofting became ripe for re-territorialisation.

The application of assemblage thinking to crofting has enabled us to disentangle processes of childhood socialisation from the direct engagement with 'rules of the game' as adults attempting to establish and develop a viable croft. Valuing and recognising livestock health can be – but does not need to be – socialised from childhood. What assemblage thinking adds to the good farmer conceptualisation is stronger reflection on the importance of the materialities of the farm operation, and the economic viability of the business. It also draws attention to the dispersed networks which inform contemporary farm configuration – farmers are not limited to the observation of their neighbours and may indeed reject these practices for a variety of reasons. They do seek examples of skilled role performance to emulate, utilising the opportunities of contemporary transportation systems and the internet to bridge distances and establish reference points. Analysis demonstrates how the historic value of crofting – reinforced through contemporary legislation – was asserted in identity formation. Newcomers and successors both identified the importance of the history of crofting to their new aspirations, utilising photos and imagery of the past to inform their imaginaries of the future. Work on the good farmer recognises the importance of history, but it is presented as linear – from father to son through multiple generations. In the case of the new crofters in this study, they skipped a generation in history, suggesting that they are instead taking off from an earlier starting point, a potential form of 'retroinnovation' (Zagata et al., 2020), where traditional ideals and ways of doing things are reinvented utilising contemporary technologies and markets.

As described in the introduction, recent good farming literature has

drawn attention to the fragmentation of good farming ideals. In this present study, new entrants to crofting established their crofts in an active attempt to revitalise their new land holdings: establishment of a new croft is a liminal activity, involving trial and error and negotiation of the practical implications of idealised notions. The resultant identities were hybrid, rather than fragmented – integrating participation in a number of different fields or assemblages into their crofting enterprise, with hybrid identities that are similarly multiple (e.g. 'crofter/weaver' or 'crofter oilman'). Findings thus draw attention to how 'good farmer' identity is shaped in relation to multifunctionality and farm diversification. Wilson, 2007) argued that smaller farms have relatively little 'room for manoevre' in relation to pursuing multifunctional trajectories, owing to the limited resources available to them. This would appear to be particularly true for crofters, where land capability is comparatively poor. Many existing crofters appear to have largely accepted these limitations and shifted to *de facto* land abandonment. However, both successors and newcomers to crofting in this study were creative in their mobilisation of new networks and opportunities for their crofts, demonstrating the agility and flexibility of small-scale production. As the case of the shunned 'traditional crofters' demonstrated, *ex novo* new entrants are able to develop and assert alternative symbols of good farming, which had the effect of enrolling an alternate suite of social and cultural capital to assemble their croft. Their sentiments and aspirations are coded by alterity, historical productivity levels and quality living. Coded this way, farmer identity enrols actors such as heritage breeds, direct to consumer market pathways, off-farm income and international agricultural expertise over the more rooted knowledge and marketing channels.

The emergence of innovative new entrants to crofting is significant given the rigid coding of crofts found in their legislative mandate. Legislation that is intended to guide land use based a small set of principles and historical norms nonetheless can be re-territorialised through powerful assertion of identity. Of course, this brings drawbacks. A crofter may be rejected by valuable social networks that have the capacity to deliver local ecological knowledge. New entrant crofters could and did fail in their endeavours, leaving the crofting region – this study included only those new entrants who remained and thus had experienced a degree of success. Within this study the new entrant respondents were typically well educated, and frequently had established professional careers behind them before acquiring a croft. These experiences gave them access to crofts elsewhere in Scotland and smallholdings outside of the UK as reference points. Study findings thus raise the question of who has the capacity to develop and assume a fluid identity, perhaps limiting the transformative potential to a certain race and class of new farmer (study participants were uniformly white). Future research in this domain should ask: To what extent is identity performed to acquire certain capital and resources? What is required in these performances, and whose performances are granted legitimacy and by whom?

6. Conclusion

This research has highlighted the importance of the discourse of crofter identity in mobilising the material capacities of crucial assets such as marginal land, voluntary labour, historical knowledge, and agrarian markets. It suggests that assertion of a mobilising identity can have broad impacts into the shape of the agrarian sector. The social work that is done to prop up entrenched notions of the good farmer influences the shape and production forms of new farms. Many policy interventions to support new entrants are driven by the idea that technical training in horticulture and entrepreneurism will lead to successful new farm businesses (Calo, 2018). This research suggests that efforts to generate new farm enterprises must also contend with the management of new farm identities.

Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by the PROAKIS FP7 project (the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no 311994), the NEWBIE H2020 project (the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 772835) and the Scottish Government's Rural Affairs, Food and the Environment Strategic Research Program (2016–2021). We wish to thank Dan Fisher of the Hutton Institute and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.10.038.

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