AN ACTOR-ORIENTED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING DAIRY FARMING IN A LIBERALISED REGIME: A CASE STUDY OF IRELAND’S NEW ENTRANT SCHEME

R. McDonald¹²*, A. Macken-Walsh³, K. Pierce² and B. Horan¹

¹Animal and Grassland Research and Innovation Centre, Teagasc Moorepark, Fermoy, Co. Cork, Ireland
²School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland
³Teagasc Rural Economy and Development Research Centre (RERC) Áras Úi Mhaoilíosa, Athenry Co. Galway, Ireland

*Currently in a position with Aurivo Cooperative Society, Tubbercurry, Co. Sligo, Ireland

Abstract

With the abolition of dairy quotas in 2015, major change in Europe’s dairy industry is imminent not only at the levels of national and international markets but at the level of individual farms. Critical questions in this context are how farmers will react to the myriad of challenges coming forth from changed policy circumstances and, relatedly what influences will ultimately determine their strategies at farm level? As part of a broader multi-disciplinary research project, this paper presents a narrative analysis of dairy farmers participating in Ireland’s New Entrant Scheme, an initiative that has facilitated the establishment of over two hundred new dairy farms in preparation for imminent quota deregulation. The paper focuses specifically on key actor-oriented dynamics determining the decisions of the New Entrant farmers (NE) at this critical period in the transformation of dairy production. Led by an actor-oriented approach, we examine through the NEs’ narratives the complex social interfaces where farmers interact with family members and peers. Peer-to-peer and social learning, which from the perspectives of the NEs culminated in the generation of credible, useful and trustworthy information, was found to have a powerful influence on the decisions of the NEs. The NEs’ decisions were found overall to reflect the economic, social and cultural functions of their farm families, particularly in relation to providing for the needs of family members and maintaining the resilience of the family farm for succession purposes. A contrast was evident between major strategic decision-making affecting the operation of the farm in the long term and decision-making relating to production and management techniques that were less transformative. The views of family farm members were penultimate in the New Entrants’ decisions to embark on new enterprises, while social learning interfaces were highly influential on habitual production and management techniques.

Keywords: farmer decision-making, actor-oriented, social interfaces, peer learning, social learning

1. Introduction theory and methodology

The European Union’s (EU) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) introduced milk quotas in 1984, to restrict milk production and guarantee high and stable prices within the EU (Whetstone, 1999). Arguably, quotas have restricted the entry of new younger dairy farmers and assisted the viability of smaller scale farmers who may not have survived economically in the absence of the market protection that quotas provided (Dillon et al., 2005). The CAP Health Check review in 2008 resulted in a decision to abolish milk quotas by 2015, with a view to reducing trade distortion within international dairy markets (IPTS, 2009). With the abolition of dairy quotas in 2015, major change in Europe’s dairy industry is imminent not only at the levels of national and international markets, but at the level of
individual farms. Critical questions in this context are how farmers will react to the myriad of challenges arising from new circumstances in dairy production and what types of influences will ultimately determine their production strategies at farm level?

In preparing for imminent dairy quota deregulation, the Irish government developed a scheme to allocate 0.25% of the annual 1% anticipated increase in national milk quota between 2009 and 2015 on a permanent basis to new entrants to dairying. Called the New Entrants Scheme (NES), its main objective is to prepare for the liberalisation of dairy production and in so doing it has facilitated a cohort of new dairy farmers to enter the dairy industry and establish new enterprises for the first time in nearly thirty years. An empirical focus on participants in the NES is particularly germane to our case study because the NEs are establishing new dairy enterprises and are, thus, without exception experiencing an intensely transformative period in which multiple decisions are being taken. Furthermore, as a result of participating in the NES, the NEs are being exposed to intensive interactions with extension agents (advisors), industry ‘experts’, and peers in learning forums such as discussion groups. In this context, the NES provides a rich case-study in which the dynamics of various actors’ influences impact on the production related decisions that the NEs ultimately take.

Pertaining to such a focus, a particularly salient theory is the ‘actor oriented’ approach to understanding behavioural dynamics (Long, 1999). This theory, which has its origins in agriculture and rural development, concentrates essentially on the implications of actors’ information, power and goals in understanding outcomes (Skutsch, 1996). The influences on farmers’ decisions, thus, are not only determined by evaluations of technical, scientific and other forms of knowledge or expertise but are socially oriented (Leeuwis et al., 1990). As Vanclay (2004) states, farmers are no longer acknowledged as passive receptors of knowledge and information, but are a part of the process in identifying and encouraging change and peer-to-peer learning amongst farmers is strongly influential on the decision-making processes of farmers (Kilpatrick, 1999, Kilpatrick and Johns, 2003, Sligo and Massey, 2007, Fisher, 2013).

The interviewing methodology used in the analysis presented in this paper is based on the Biographic-Narrative-Interpretative-Method (BNIM); an interviewing tool used in qualitative research for exploring people’s life histories, lived situations and personal experiences (Wengraf, 2011). The purpose of the method is to elicit a richly contextual narrative response to a single interview question at the outset that relates to but is not overtly detailed to the research question at hand. In such a way, there is an attempt to limit the bias of the researcher’s research motivations on the response of the interviewee, who is encouraged to tell a narrative that illustrates all s/he positions as relevant, according to her/his own world view, vis-à-vis the general prompt question told by the researcher. For analysis, the interview material is vast when transcribed and the researcher is challenged with reconciling the body of intricate data, biographic in nature, and examining the ways in which the data relate to a complex interplay of theories or research questions perhaps not previously considered by the researcher. The result is an analysis that draws from multiple theories and empirical examples that is customised to the data presented in the narratives and that is capable of arriving at nuanced, insightful and potentially original conclusions (Wengraf, 2001).

From the entire population of NEs in 2011, (total population of 230 (McDonald et al., 2013)) eight were selected for the in-depth interviewing process. The group of eight was selected to achieve a general balance in terms of age, region within Ireland, and whether or not they had previous experience in dairy farming prior to entering the NES. The interviewees gave narrative accounts of their subjective experiences of entering dairy farming and developing their own farm businesses, referring to the contexts and implications of these experiences from the perspectives of the interviewees themselves. Instrumental particularly to this paper, the NEs’ narratives revealed rich data on social interfaces and the diverse circumstances in which a variety of actors influenced the NEs’ decisions in different and complex ways.

As part of a broader multi-disciplinary research project (McDonald et al., 2013; McDonald et al., 2014) this paper presents a qualitative analysis of key behavioural determinants motivating the farmers’
decisions and activities. The paper focuses on a specific part of this relatively broad question, which is the nature of various actors’ (i.e. family members and peers) influences on the decisions of the case study of New Entrant (NE) dairy farmers in this critical period of dairy production transformation.

2. Results & discussion

As a result of in-depth analysis to the interviews of the new entrants three main ‘actors’ were determined to influence the new farmers decisions. However, for the purposes of this paper only peer and family influence is discussed.

Interfaces within the family farm

The term family farming refers essentially to a family operated farm, with its ownership transferred from generation to generation of the same family (Djurfeldt, 1996). Farms that are family operated and owned have complex and diverse implications for how decisions are taken in relation to the farm. The decisions made within the family are a result of constant negotiation processes amongst family members (Farmer-Bowers, 2010). The power dynamics on family farms are inevitably complex and entail multiple interfaces between diverse family members with differing positions of power and different relationships.

Irish agriculture is dominated by family farms, with less than 1% of farmland passing through the market annually (Hennessy et al., 2011), a figure representing a low number of new entrants to farming outside of the existing network of family farms. At a time of significant policy change and imminent abolition of dairy quota - largely comparable to the transformation which occurred in New Zealand in the mid 1980s (Johnsen, 2004) - family farm systems in Ireland are planning major adjustment strategies in order to maintain viability. As illustrated by the narratives of the NEs, although (to greater and lesser extents) they were the main operators or managers of their family farms, their decisions - and specifically the most important strategic decisions relating to the future of their farms - were almost always taken in close consultation with family members.

Many of the NEs’ narratives highlighted that the establishment of their new enterprises in the first instance was conditional on the active support of family members.

Hansson et al. (2013) found that farmers who diversified their farming business were driven by a complex array of motives which depend on the family situation, the family’s willingness to be a part of planning and managing, and the families own aspirations. In practical terms, the new businesses required the contributions of family members’ labour in the initial set up as well as subsequent operation of the farms. The labour contribution of family members was one of the explicitly apparent aspects of the NEs’ narratives that illustrated the family oriented nature of their farms. Evidence of a habitual reliance on family farm labour was present in the narratives term but also a critical reliance at the vulnerable early stages of the NEs’ new dairy enterprises:

“And we do pretty much all things but we help each other out with labour. So it’s kind of I suppose if he (brother) wants a hand I give him a hand, if I want a hand he’ll give me a hand .... So I suppose the dairy thing if there’s only one of us here, you know, it couldn’t ... it wouldn’t be a runner.”

Family operated farms and in particular the sharing of responsibilities for labour among family members, however, inevitably cause issues of power to come into play. While flexible labour is available within family farms, it is also the case that labour from some individuals can go unrecognised and undervalued leading to conflict, poor relationships and the family farm becoming unsustainable in the mid to long term (Hutson, 1987). From another perspective, it can also be the case that the main operator or owner of the farm can be hindered, due to the labour inputs and consequential control of family
members, to take unilateral decisions or to develop the farm in a new direction (Kennedy, 1991, Sottomayor et al., 2011, Macken-Walsh et al., 2012). While arrangements such as farm partnerships (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012) can assist in the realisation of individual family members’ goals, power balances can also be improved through natural albeit protracted progression of the lifecycle and associated ‘family farm cycle’ where farm heirs come to assume greater responsibility for the family farm (Kennedy, 1991, Arensberg and Kimball, 2001). In various circumstances, new practices can be introduced by main farm operators as part of the iterative development of the farm, as experienced by several NEs who ultimately had taken on a large proportion of the responsibility for establishing new dairy farms on existing family farm holdings (Fairweather and Keating, 1994):

“I was a bit glad to be going out of it ... we’ve come a long way since the grass at home now as well like.”

The context in which the NEs described the strong influences that farm family members had on their decisions was often linked with the esteem they had in their family members as fellow farmers. On the basis of the NEs’ knowledge of their family members’ expertise and experience in farming, they had particularly strong trust in and respect for the advice they received from family members. While it was the case that family members had influences on the NEs’ major strategic decisions on the basis of their kin relationships and their membership in the same farm family, where family members were themselves farming, the NEs were particularly influenced by the advice of family in relation to habitual farm production and management decisions. The credibility of fellow farmers’ advice in this regard was also borne out in the NEs’ narratives relating to the influences of their farmer peers who were unrelated to them by kin, which is discussed in the following section.

Peer-to-peer interfaces

Farmers sharing and deliberating existing and new information in an informal setting provides an environment where effective social learning can occur. It is largely on the basis of the effectiveness of social learning, a process that is itself the focus of a vast literature on agriculture and development (High and Nemes, 2007, Macken-Walsh, Forthcoming), that peer-to-peer relationships are understood to be greatly influential on individual farmers’ decision-making processes. Through farmers’ informal and lay discussions, farm production and management strategies and ideas can undergo a ‘translational’ process whereby the practical nature and implications of the strategies and ideas can be translated to the context of practical, on-farm use (Macken-Walsh et al., 2010). Through peer-to-peer interactions at local levels among farmers in shared physical environments, information deliberated and shared can be of enhanced relevance to farmers. As a combined result of the translational process of information into practice, the localised and thus highly relevant nature of the information translated, the parity of power relations between farmer peers, and the confidence that farmers have in each other’s ‘tried and tested’ knowledge, the mutual influence on farmers engaged in peer-to-peer interfaces was found in the current study of NEs to be highly potent:

“Talking to farmers yeah, that’s the best. I mean you have to talk to a man that milks cows.”

“...look definitely if you don’t know ring a fella and ask him... you know a fella who is in the same situation, the same area, getting the same weather like, do you know what I mean.”

Frequently in the NEs’ narratives were references to ‘strong farmers’ (Shutes, 2003) or ‘role model’ farmers, farmers who were held in high esteem not only by the NEs individually but by a wider social group of farmers. The ‘role model’ farmers were recognised as such by their peers on the basis of their demonstrated track records in making correct decisions and in operating efficient and productive farm enterprises. As identified in the literature, ‘role model’ farmers are people who are capable of influencing other people’s attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviours (Valente and
Pumpuang, 2007) and who undertake informal leadership that is not conferred by any official function but is earned and maintained through technical ability, social accessibility, and conforming to a social system’s norms (Rogers, 2003). NE’s coming into contact with ‘role model’ farmers with whom they can identify could prompt NEs to aspire towards greater farm efficiency and productivity when they see the lifestyle or success that the role model farmer had as a result of their farm production and management approach. This could be a very strong motivating factor for NEs to aspire towards enhanced efficiency, especially in a local area where the similarities between their own situations and the role models’ situations were evident:

“I see some fellas with 60 cows and they’re bogged down with work like. I see fellas 120,130 (cows) and 10 o’clock in the morning they’d go away and read the paper for an hour and there are way more organised...”

The ‘role model’ farmers referred to in the NEs narratives could be part of the same local community as the NEs, where the NEs were personally familiar with them and their track records, or they could be located outside the locality with track records that the NEs were familiar with by reputation. The important influence of local role models on NE behaviours is also reflected in the geographical location of these new dairy farm businesses as McDonald et al. (2013) has previously observed that the majority of new entrants are establishing within the traditional milk production areas in Ireland, where the majority of existing successful specialist dairy farmers are located. It was evident from the NEs’ narratives that the NEs deliberately sought out the advice of the ‘role models’ and did not experience hesitancy in doing so. It was also apparent from the NEs’ narratives that the ‘role models’ providing advice in an informal way were eager and willing to provide advice in assisting the NEs to develop efficient dairy enterprises. As found in an Irish study undertaken by Shutes (2003), ‘role farmers’ are cognisant of their roles and can feel a sense of responsibility to their fellow farmers.

Problematic issues of power differentials in the interfaces between NEs and ‘role models’ were not evident in the NEs’ narratives. One explanatory factor relating to the absence of power differentials was the informal nature of the information sharing dialogue between the ‘role models’ and the NEs, involving casual discussion and no remuneration. It is also important to note in relation to the absence of power differentials that it was evident from the NEs’ narratives that they themselves often had positions of ‘role models’ in their local communities, perhaps in the context of operating their former enterprises, which is consistent with the profile of NEs as a particularly motivated and successful group of farmers (McDonald et al., 2013). Furthermore, it stands to reason that the approaches of ‘role models’ in their interactions and relations with farmers had qualities, such as an observance of mutual respect, culminating in their recognition organically within the farming community as ‘role models’ in the first instance.

“...we wouldn’t have had any sit down chats with him or anything but just yeah taking their opinion on board...”

‘Role models’ or ‘opinion leaders’ used strategically by extension services to encourage the diffusion of technologies and the adoption of farm production and management innovations can be effective largely as a result of tapping into the peer-to-peer farmer interface. The functions of ‘role models’ as identified by extension agencies is to provide a communication channel between the local community and the agencies that wish to encourage the implementation of a particular programme; to lead by example as role models for behaviour change; and act as leaders or promoters of a programme once the agencies are removed (Valente and Pumpuang, 2007). Programmes that have utilised ‘role models’ among farmers have demonstrated greater success in achieving their objectives than those that have not (Valente and Pumpuang, 2007).

Farmers’ identification of ‘role models’ can be highly subjective with the ‘role models’ reflecting farmers’ own needs, aspirations, circumstances and viewpoints (Sears and Freedman, 1974, Leonard-
Barton, 1985). ‘Role models’ recognised as such by farmers can be innovative leaders who use the strategies promoted by extension agencies and can equally be those who oppose what is promoted by extension agencies (Rogers, 2003). Critically, Rogers (2003) claims that opinion leaders must reflect the norms of their peers’ social groups in order to maintain their leadership status. Agencies can also identify ‘role models’ that may not be recognised as such by farming communities, or by segments of farming communities. Furthermore, when ‘role models’ who would have previously taken a personalised approach to advising farmers are utilised to promote larger-scale technological blueprints specifically, they can lose their effectiveness in encouraging farmers to make more incremental changes to their farm production and management techniques.

3. Conclusion

Taking an actor-oriented approach to understanding how various actors influenced the NEs, combined with an in-depth qualitative data collection method, has assisted the analysis presented in this paper to uncover the complex social interfaces between NEs and the actors who had the most prominent influences on their actions and decisions.

The majority of NEs are family farmers, which was reflected in the sample of NE farmers interviewed in depth using the BNIM method. The influence of family members on the NEs’ decisions was significant in relation to the nature of the (economic, social and cultural) goals associated with their new dairy enterprises, which reflected the needs of multiple family members as well as a priority focus on maintaining the resilience of the family farm for succession purposes. The NEs depended significantly on the assistance of family farm members, as without their support and inputs (labour in particular) the establishment of their new dairy enterprises would not have been possible. Family members’ mentoring and advice was also cited as a highly valued and indispensable aide to the NEs’ establishment of new dairy businesses, underpinned often by NEs’ high regard for the farming abilities of the family members whom they had witnessed farming for many years.

As regards peer-to-peer influence between NEs and fellow farmers, it was strongly oriented to and hinged on the translation of ideas and information into practical options for the enhancement of farm efficiency and productivity. Similar to the basis for the credibility of family members’ advice, the advice of fellow farmers was valued because of its resonance with practical experience and trial and error, which was highly valued by the NEs. NEs explicitly sought to use fellow farmer’s views, experiences and knowledge to ‘proof’ the ideas they received through new expert channels and in this regard, local networks of farmers operating similar systems in the same physical environment as the NEs were particularly influential on the NEs’ decisions. The importance of local ‘role models’ arose frequently in the NEs narratives, and it was clear that NEs approached numerous ‘role models’ in their own localities and elsewhere with a view to gaining their expertise.

The value of discussion groups as perceived by the NEs was firmly linked to peer-to-peer interaction and learning from the experiences of other farmers. The growing positions of NEs as ‘role models’ themselves were simultaneously enhanced through this process of ‘outgrowing’. Such experiences of the NEs highlight not only the determination of this particular group of farmers to gain expertise and ‘upskill’ to manage their new dairy enterprises effectively, but also opportunities for extension providers to strategically leverage and enhance existing peer-to-peer learning and to develop new and diverse methodologies to respond in targeted ways to the needs of increasingly specialised farming groups.

4. Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the participating new entrant dairy farmers for their assistance and the financial support of Allied Irish Bank for this research.
5. References


