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Of organic farmers and 'good farmers': Changing habitus in rural England

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In recent years, numerous studies have identified the importance of cultural constructions of 'good farming' to farming practice. In this paper, we develop the 'good farming' construct through an empirical study of organic and conventional farmers, focussing on how change occurs. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and fields, we argue that the dynamics of the 'rules of the game' in the agricultural field have simultaneously led to a broadening of the 'good farming' ideal, and to a fragmentation, whereby individual farmers prioritise a subset of this broad range. We demonstrate that gradual devaluation of existing ways to achieve cultural capital is essential to the development of new symbolic values. In line with this, we offer a critique of the implied static nature of cultural capital in the studies of farmer responses to agri-environmental schemes. We also point out that the alterations in perception and practices of farmers who converted to organic farming for 'pragmatic' reasons may be greater than sometimes implied.

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1. Introduction

Considerable literature in recent years has demonstrated the importance of 'good farming' ideals to farming practice. Proponents of the 'good farming' concept are consistent in their arguments that farmers gain social standing through adherence to a set of principles based on values and standards embedded in farming culture. Multiple studies have identified these 'good farming' symbols, such as high yields, tidy fields and good quality livestock (Gray, 1998; Silvasti, 2003; Burton, 2004; Stock, 2007; Burton et al., 2008; Haggerty et al., 2009; Hunt, 2010). Although the 'good farming' concept has been well established, the focus of these studies is typically on good farming symbols as they currently exist. Studies thus present a 'snap-shot' of current farming ideals, with little attention given to the critical issue of how these ideals change. Indeed, the adherence to 'good farming' standards is often identified as a reason for farmer resistance to change. For example, Burton (2004; Burton et al., 2008), in his UK-based research on 'good farmers', consistently emphasises the cultural resistance of farmers, particularly in response to agri-environmental schemes.

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However, farming practices clearly change over time, e.g. in response to new technologies, markets, and government policies. In particular, the issue of adoption of voluntary agri-environmental schemes has been widely studied (see Edwards-Jones, 2006 for a review). The choice to participate in an agri-environmental change, as well as other farm-level adaptations lead to changes in farming practices which can be expected to influence cultural norms and thus the definitions of 'good farming'. For example, Haggerty et al. (2009) argue that considerable changes to both livestock production practices and standards of 'good farming' are occurring in response to changes in the political economy of New Zealand farming. Studies of farm-level responses to agricultural transformations thus show that changes are not confined to the farm enterprise, but extend to equally significant transformation within the cultural domain, i.e. to what is seen as necessary and acceptable to a farmer (Johnsen, 2004; Evans, 2009). The responsiveness to the (perceived) context also contributes to diversity. Indeed, various authors have also pointed out that definitions of 'good farming' differ between and within farm types (van der Ploeg, 2003; Haggerty et al., 2009; Hunt, 2010) and that there may be a geographic boundedness, i.e. local farmers are those that constitute the reference group (Hatch, 1992, p. 128). The features of 'good farming' are thus typically specific to regions and the commodities produced in them, reflecting skilled commodity production under regional conditions. However, despite noting diversity and change,