

## Reconstituting Male Identities through Joint Farming Ventures in Ireland

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## Abstract

The analysis of this paper is located in the theoretical interplay between the concepts of identity and masculinity, contributing to the ongoing debate on gendered identities and masculinities in family farming. Our focus in this paper is specifically on men who established formal collaborative arrangements (Joint Farming Ventures, JFVs) with fellow farmers, including family members. We present an empirical analysis of primary qualitative data, using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM), which has particular analytical purchase in the study of identity. Our analysis finds that formal collaborative arrangements in the form of JFVs are employed as resilience strategies by male farmers. The strategies strive to continue the performance of some traditional masculinity traits but markedly involve the renegotiation of hegemonic masculine identity forms, resonant with debates elsewhere on reconstituting gender norms in family farming. Our narrative analysis finds that men's entry to and operation of JFVs entail a conscious and active relinquishing of dominant decision-making power on their farms, an openness to the views and opinions of others, and a greater willingness to help-seek and express emotions.

## Introduction

Male farmer identity has been traditionally characterised in the sociological literature as hegemonic, scripted by narratives of hard work, tenacity, self-reliance and provision, reinforced by men's position as head of and 'breadwinner' for the farm household (Brandth, 1995; Saugeres 2002; Shortall and Byrne, 2009). However, socio-cultural and economic challenges to hegemonic masculinity (Alston and Kent, 2008; Bryant and Pini, 2011; Shortall, 2014) have emerged over the past two decades.

In the first instance, the performative characteristics of traditional hegemonic male identity appear out-dated in an increasingly globalised agricultural economy, where farm family self-subsistence is increasingly rare. The traditional value of physical work, tenacity and self-reliance continues to be esteemed at some level in agricultural communities, but where farms are integrated into low-cost, high-scale global commodity markets it is increasingly difficult for family farmers to financially sustain a livelihood (Ní Laoire, 2005). Off-farm work is now a crucial feature of farm household resilience, with farm women frequently participating in the off farm labour market as breadwinners, which in turn can present threats to men's traditional identities as providers for the family (Kelly and Shortall, 2002; Shortall, 2014; Riley and Sangster, 2017). In such transitional contexts, contemporary rural men can experience feelings of 'entrapment and hopelessness', compounded by factors such as unprofitable agriculture and stifling socio-cultural conditions in rural and agricultural communities (Ní Laoire, 2001, 233). Against this backdrop, farming is for some

considered a 'poisoned chalice' (Kelly and Shortall, 2002), with males possibly coerced by long-standing socio-cultural norms to keep the farm intact and retain the lineage of family ownership. Once the dominant head of the household and farm, a role vested with prestige and status, many farming men are ever increasingly on the verge of 'being defined as abandoned, unmodern and even pitiable' (Brandth 2002, 191).

In the second instance, discussions of male farmer identity in the literature have strongly relied on Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which refers to a particular set of masculine traits that are socio-culturally exalted. However, it is also the case that any discussion of identity must take into account the dynamic nature of its formation and re-formation. Transactional and performative, identity operates at the levels of the 'self and the social' (Byrne, 2003; Cush *et al.*, 2017). While discussions in the literature of male identity are often principally informed by hegemonic masculinity, we are cognisant that it does not exclusively define male farmer identity. Of course, there are alternative, cultural forms of identity with dynamic masculine constructions. It is in this context that we recognise male farmer identity as non-essentialist and as having the capacity at the levels of the self and the social to be dynamic and responsive to different scenarios.

The analysis of this paper is therefore located in the theoretical interplay between the concepts of identity and masculinity, contributing to the existing debate on 'reconstituting' relationships in family farming and implications arising for gendered identities and masculinities. Drawing from a larger study, our focus in this paper is specifically on men who established Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs), which are formal cooperative arrangements identified internationally as resulting in social, economic and cultural benefits to those involved (Barthez, 2000; Egil-Flø, 2006; Almas, 2010; Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012). We present an empirical analysis of primary qualitative data, using the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM), which has particular analytical purchase in the study of identity. Our analysis finds that formal collaborative arrangements in the form of Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs) are employed as a resilience strategy by farmers in responding to threats. The narratives of the farming males involved in JFVs evidence a continuation of the performance of traditional masculinity traits but also the renegotiation and reconstitution of

masculine identity. Resonant with the concept of reconstituting gender relationships, we find evidence of dialogic masculinity (Peter *et al.*, 2000) in the narratives of the male interviewees. Our narrative analysis finds that men's entry to and operation of JFVs signals an active relinquishing of dominant decision-making power on their farms, an openness to the views and opinions of others, a greater willingness to help-seek and the expression of emotions.

### **Identity and masculinity**

Our theoretical framework relies on the concepts of identity and masculinity while considering the analytical purchase of narrative analysis in exploring these concepts. Where identity is concerned, following Byrne (2003, 6) we distinguish between self and social identity on the basis that 'gender, like identity, is simultaneously internal and external to the person'. Female and male identities are often mis-treated as dichotomous despite the 'across-gender fluidity of emotional lives' (Cleary, 2005, 156). There is general acceptance that identity is subjectively and relationally dynamic in the sense that it is 'formed, performed and recreated' (Shortall, 2017, 162) but also, at the social level, the category of gender is recognised as being particularly 'stubborn' (Shortall, 2017, 163). As explained by Byrne (2003, 6):

"Gender is regarded as involved in the primary ordering of social identities: it is a collective categorisation, marking boundaries of difference between female and male, stressing similarity within these social categories, but also emphasising difference within hierarchies of males and females. It is deeply implicated in the composition of self-identity, affecting personal conceptions of social identities of womanhood or manhood".

Thus, while male identity may not be treated as essentialist, gender identities at the level of the social in particular can appear to be hegemonic especially in traditionally gendered occupations such as farming (see Shortall, 2016, for a review). In this context, a discussion of gendered identities in agriculture may leverage the rich literature on femininities and masculinities (Brandth, 1995; Bryant and Pini, 2011; Pini, Brandth and Little, 2014). 'Masculinity', for instance, is simply defined as

possession of the characteristics typically associated with men. Hegemonic masculinity, on the other hand, is where a certain set of masculine traits are culturally exalted above other types of masculinity (Connell, 1995). This set of masculine traits represent a set of expectations for boys and men in the expression of their masculinity and ‘stands as a normative conception to which men are held accountable’ (Kane, 2006, 152). Traditional male farmer identity is consistent with what Connell (1995) coined hegemonic masculinity. Within this hegemonic masculinity, in place for well over a century in many cultures, gender norms and patriarchy position the male farmer as head of the household, affirmed by particular types of occupational traits centred on farm work. Central traits are an ability to attend to the physical demands of farming through hard work; displaying the necessary acumen to overcome difficult environmental and market conditions; a capacity for tenacity in the face of such challenges; and occupying the breadwinner role for the household (Liepins 1998; Saugeres 2002a and 2002b; Bartlett and Conger, 2004; Ní Laoire, 2005).

Hegemonic masculinity impacts on male farmer identity by bearing the influence of culturally exalted traits on identity formation, performance and recreation. Hegemonic masculinity is largely a consequence of the social and cultural conventions of agriculture, where patrilineal succession norms typically favoured the eldest son as the rightful heir to the farm, bestowing a clear identity upon the farming male from a young age (Shortall and Byrne, 2009; Cassidy and McGrath, 2014; Fischer and Burton, 2014). Accompanying patrilineal succession is a gendering of the farm, supporting the male subject position as possessing innate knowledge of the land and farming matters (Leckie 1996; Saugeres 2002b). Media representations of farming have perpetuated the discursive construction of farming as a masculine enterprise, dependent on masculinised traits of hard work, strength and tenacity (Duggan 1987; Brandth 1995; Liepins 1998, 2000; Brandth and Haugen, 2005). Women are subjugated in this process (Saugeres 2002b), with men enabled to control farming capital (Saugeres 2002a). The traditional identity position of male farmers has been associated with the large scale subjugation of women in agriculture, despite their vital contributions to the resilience of the farm household (Whatmore, 1991; Shortall and Byrne, 2009; Riley and Sangster, 2107).

As several authors have highlighted, however, contemporary agriculture evidences at least a partial unravelling of the traditional male hegemonic order. Where once the male farmer was ubiquitously powerful, in control, and highly esteemed within rural society, his position is now increasingly challenged and threatened (Brandth, 2002). These, and other factors, have involved changing gender roles in farm families (Shortall, 2014; Byrne *et al.*, 2014; Cush *et al.*, 2017). An increasing body of research suggests that traditional male farmer identity is altering from narratives of hard physical work towards an emphasis on capacity for business acumen in a competitive market place (Brandth, 1995; Little, 2002). Here there is an emphasis on a professional/entrepreneurial identity, involving stratagems and rationality (Bartlett and Conger 2004). Nusbaumer (2011) argues that this is closely associated with Connell's (1995) view of a wider corporate hegemonic masculinity that is structured around the demands of corporate work. This is broadly consistent with the analyses of McVay (2016) on gender and leadership and of Little (2016) on gender and entrepreneurship. In this context, rural place is less significant in the construction of gender identities and rural hegemonic masculinity is increasingly informed and shaped by broader urban and professional discourses (Campbell and Bell 2000 cited in Nusbaumer 2011; Shortall, 2016). We see some evidence of this in the Irish context, where altering hegemonic masculinity is characterised by a willingness to accept risk in the global market place, entrepreneurialism, and an ability to overcome professional challenges to provide for the family – all of which remains tempered, however, by a desire to preserve the family farm in family ownership (McDonald *et al.*, 2014).

What we also witness is the presence of alternative narratives of rural masculinities, corresponding to the view that social actors identify with multiple identities (Stets and Burke, 2005). Amongst farmers in Norway, Bye (2009) notes that as a result of changing economic and social conditions, many men resolve potential identity crises by accepting flexible definitions of masculinity. Increasingly employed in the definition of rural manhood is a special emphasis on leisure-time, a work/life balance and the caring roles of fatherhood. Such men perform rural masculinity by being 'present fathers' (Bye 2009, 286) challenging dominant masculinity narratives that work should completely define them as rural men (see also Brandth, 2016). Similarly, Brandth and Overrein (2013)

show how the rise of a 'new parent culture', has involved men taking on roles of 'intensive parenting', with affective roles increasingly informing men's performative gender styles. In many ways, these alternative masculine positions reflect what Peter *et al.* (2000, 216) refer to as dialogic masculinity, where the rural man is "more open to talking about making mistakes, to expressing emotions, to change and to criticism, to a less controlling attitude towards machines and the environment and, to different measures of work and success". This topic is further explored by Riley and Sangster (2017).

Contemporary forms of rural masculinity continuously emerge and our discussion examines how these take shape within the specific economic and socio-cultural context of contemporary agriculture in Ireland. Ireland is a context like many others where constructions of male farmers' identity are in flux, with research showing that traditional hegemonic masculinity has long been under threat (Ní Laoire, 2005). The vast majority of beef and sheep farms for instance are characterised by low incomes, with average incomes in 2015 in the cattle and sheep sectors at €20,938 and €14,664 respectively (Lynch *et al.*, 2016). Income on dairy farms are higher with an average of €47,860 in 2015 but are impacted by price volatility in the marketplace (Lynch *et al.* 2016). Such poor economic returns from agriculture have posed, over a long period of time, serious threats to the male farmer role as family breadwinner (Kelly and Shortall 2002; Ní Laoire 2005). Furthermore, the increasing participation of farm-women in the off-farm labour market and the importance of their off-farm earnings to the household threaten men's sense of a provider for the family (Kelly and Shortall 2002; Shortall 2014). Such a 'crisis in masculinity' (Brandth 2002) is often manifested in 'feelings of guilt, stress and anxiety' among farmers, which threatens their sense of psychological security (Ní Laoire, 2005, 107). More pronounced in a culture that values 'mobility and individual progress' (Ní Laoire 2001, 232), male farmers' attachment to traditional socio-cultural constructions of manhood can give rise to a sense of hopelessness, entrapment, decreased financial security and lowered self-esteem.

Against such a backdrop, the analysis of this paper focuses on the strategies of a small number of men in response to adverse circumstances and threats. Drawing from a larger study focused on the experiences of JFVs among older and younger farmers, female and male farmers, and farmers operating different farming enterprises, the analysis presented in this paper focuses specifically on

Irish male farmers who have entered into JFVs. We utilise narrative analysis as an empirical tool because of the capacity of narrative data to illuminate the stories which underpin one's social identity. We acknowledge Strawson's (2004) critique that narrative cannot accurately capture identity, not least because it is not possible for people to give voice to inner parts of the 'self' through a narrative or story. However, Ritivoi (2009), argues that identity is determined not only by selfhood but also by social identity, where the social self is built through the stories people tell to others, where particular events are given particular meanings which provide a sense of coherence and order in people's lives, and relate to a wider narrative about one's self identity. It is in the telling of such stories that people engage in the on-going construction of the social self, relationally through interactions with others. Narrative inquiry, thus, in its capacity to elicit such stories, is an effective tool to enable an understanding of social identity.

In this context we adopt Ritivoi's (2002, 24) conceptualisation of narrative as an 'epistemic and social transaction' and rather than focusing only on identity and masculinity at the level of the self, we focus on the active dimensions of social identities in strategising resilience. Just as Byrne *et al.* (2014) recognised the capacity for women to 'feminise' agriculture in ways that involve 'initiating a series of purposive and meaningful actions in concert with men'; our analysis is attentive to men's relationships with others, where such relationships are evidently implicated in the change and reconstitution of masculinities. We use the term 'reconstituting', following Byrne *et al.* (2014), to describe the process of active and relationally interactive identity (re-)formation, which is well theorised in the literature but, as noted by Shortall (2017, 164), mostly in relation to singular groups. This paper partially responds to that deficit by using narrative to analyse men's social experiences while also remaining attentive to evidence at the level of the self of 'resistance to dominant conceptions and attempts to articulate new conceptions of (male) hood' (Byrne, 2003, 6).

### **Research Context and Methodology**

The findings presented in this paper draw from a larger research project focused on the potential role of JFVs in Irish agriculture. One aspect of the project was to analyse the social and self identities of

male landholders over the age of 35, a cohort that owns approximately 81% of Irish farms (CSO, 2012). Farmers involved in JFVs specifically are an interesting group from which we can explore contemporary masculine constructions as they are known to be particularly resilient, leveraging farm resources and local, social networks to develop enhanced resilience strategies which respond to a variety of threats to the family farm; including price volatility, inadequate scale, workload burdens, decreased leisure and family time, lack of specialisations, and insufficient skills and resources on the farm (Macken-Walsh and Roche 2012). JFVs are formal, legal arrangements on farms which essentially involve two or more farmers working together as partners, independently of who owns the land on which the business is operating. There is a range of different JFVs, the most common forms of which are milk production partnerships, contract rearing agreements, share farming, and producer groups (including small cooperatives). According to a nationally representative survey conducted in 2016, approximately 15% of farmers are or have been in the past involved in a JFV, the vast majority of which were involved in milk production partnerships (Rush *et al.*, 2016). JFVs and Milk Production Partnerships in particular have been identified as enhancing the resilience of the family farm by providing a suite of socio-economic benefits, including increased scale, improved access to labour, better work/life balance, reduced work pressure, and safer working conditions (Turner & Hambly, 2005; ADAS, 2007; Ingram & Kirwan, 2011; Almas, 2010; Macken-Walsh & Roche, 2012; Byrne *et al.*, 2014). They also suggest a departure from patriarchal family farming and it is in this respect that we sought to add to these studies by exploring further whether other types of JFVs evidence transitions towards non-hegemonic masculinities and identities.

Utilising the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM), this paper draws upon findings from case studies of three male farmers involved in JFVs. The three case studies were selected purposively, a sampling technique which draws upon a particular group of respondents who can elicit rich insights into a particular phenomenon under study (Patton, 1990). We sought to explore the narratives of three males who used JFVs as a resilience strategy, focusing on types of JFVs that have received little attention in the literature heretofore: share farming; contract rearing and producer groups. Sampling was assisted by agricultural development officers who also acted as gate keepers.

With the assistance of the agricultural development officers we identified three males involved in the three main types of JFVs, which satisfied our study criteria as we wished simply to study masculine identities in the context of JFVs. The small sample size is not problematic in the context of the exploratory nature of the research, which enables the study to achieve theoretical generalisability (Yin, 2009) as it contributes to the building of theory around male identity construction in Irish family farming. We anticipated that certain aspects of our findings could transpire to be specific to the particular types of JFVs the men were involved in. However, as demonstrated by the findings the themes arising in the data were largely unspecific to the organisational and technical features of the JFVs in which the farmers are involved.

We chose the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) as an approach for narrative analysis, which has a specific application to the study of farmer subjectivities (Inhetveen, 1990). One of the distinct advantages of utilising the BNIM is that it generates data to support the analysis of the story of the life course longitudinally, and the events and experiences that are implicated in current and past behaviours and decision making in an individual's life. The interviewing method involves posing a single question to induce the narrative (SQUIN), where the interviewee is invited to speak uninterrupted about a particular topic (sub-session 1); followed by a second phase where the interviewer asks probing questions of interest to the study regarding particular aspects of the interviewee's narrative (Wengraf 2011).

In this instance, the SQUIN was: "can you please tell me the story of your experiences in share farming, the producer group or contract rearing". Sub-session 2 enabled us to ask more specific questions. For instance, when one farmer spoke in sub-session 1 about acquiring greater status as a dairy farmer (enabled by the JFV), we were then able to ask him if he could remember any specific moment where he really felt this. His elaborations enabled us to gain rich insights into the emotional process underpinning JFVs.

For analysis, we began by developing a chronology of objective life events, which Wengraf (2011) terms as the Biographic Data Analysis phase. This involves a sequencing of the chronological

events within the narrative, which delineated some of the factually verifiable, objective information regarding the contextual environment of the respondents. Following this, a thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted in order to make meaning of the narratives through the lens of theoretical concepts in the literature. After a thorough reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts through sociologists' eyes, an initial coding (Creswell, 2003) of the data began which involved identifying themes in the data from the initial reading process and a rigorous re-investigation of the data through the lens of these themes and associated sub-themes. The themes were as follows:

- Direct connection with the customer (the visible farmer)
- An ability to overcome challenges
- Public displays of animal husbandry
- An ability to be 'professional'

These codes helped us to link the farmers' narratives to wider debates surrounding masculinity and contemporary agriculture, enabling us to develop a distinct theme on JFVs and occupational status, where some of the traditional discourses of masculinity were found. Further coding of the data identified three more themes.

- Openness
- Communication
- Caring and consideration for others

The range of themes, their inter-connections with each other and with the wider literature on what is known about male identity and rural masculinity are presented in the analysis below. All respondents are offered pseudonyms to afford them anonymity.

## Analysis

### *Case 1: John and the producer group*

John is a dry stock farmer who is a member of a producer group (a small farmer co-operative) which sells branded, high quality fresh meat at a premium price directly to local butchers and restaurants.

John identifies his frustrations with poor profit margins for farmers in the value chain as a primary reason behind his and others' formation of a producer group, which had the intention of increasing profit margins for farmers by selling directly to consumers. While improved economic returns from the marketplace was the primary motivation behind the establishment of the producer group; it is also apparent in John's narrative that socio-cultural values have also been supported. This is evident in how he attributes meaning to having a direct connection with his customers and more ownership of his animals:

“The way farming has developed over the last 30 years... if I was sending my (animals) into a truck they were just loaded into a truck and the next thing I'd do, is that I'd see a cheque for my animals and I'd have no connection to where those animals go or to the customer, and that's the way the thing developed - it kind of weakened that link. I remember my late father telling me that when they'd go to the fair - you know the fair is where they went to sell cattle, just on the side of the street - you might go the fair in February where you stand beside your animals, and, well, he'd say 'you'd stand beside your winter's work'. If you done a bad job you'd have to stand and if you done a good job, you'd be proud of your winter's work. That's what we've actually brought back into the thing and I think that's a real positive at farming level you know. You know when I'm picking my animals I know that when I'm picking these animals, that these animals are going in, and I do my best to get it right. You know I remember getting my first cheque for animals. I said this is real, that we actually had them sold and slaughtered, and the money came back through the system and you're not faceless anymore, the customers know where it's coming from, your work is on display and that gives you a lift like, definitely. That this is actually real, that it puts more meaning into your farming.”

The producer group has enabled John to become more visible as a farmer; his products are on display and attributed specifically to him. He associates, with affection, direct selling in the marketplace to the inter-generational norms of farming, linking his present activities to that of his father. The public

recognition of the farmer's husbandry and the direct connection between 'farmer' and 'herd' is bestowed with considerable value and meaning for him, a hallmark of traditional masculine identity in agricultural communities (Peter *et al.* 2006). John is on display once more as a farmer, has an audience to which he can perform the farmer's role socially and also for his own self-esteem.

Throughout his narrative John explains that despite the many benefits associated with the producer group, they face many challenges. He continually frames the producer group as a very challenging experience, arguing: "the one message I'd like to give you is that it's a very challenging game to do what we're doing". Despite the many challenges facing John and his group, they are not so daunting that they cannot be overcome:

"You look at a problem, you apply your mind to it... and together we can find ways of overcoming it and that's a very good thing about our group, we don't blame each other, we see a problem, apply our minds and overcome it, and work with each other"

He also speaks in his narrative about overcoming any issues with customers and explains that quality is the top priority and that there is no compromise when it comes to this issue, even if it involves taking a financial hit:

"We don't get it right all the time, we do get things wrong, but the key then is we deal with it. We don't make excuses, we don't try to talk our way out of it, we take the hit and we deal with it."

Such an emphasis on toughness and tenacity reveals a farming identity that resonates with typical features of traditional masculinity. However, alternative forms of masculinity are also expressed through his narrative. While John has worked towards restoring some of the traditional forms of male farmer identity, such as the identity position of 'provider' through the producer group, the operation of the producer group involves more flexible definitions of masculinity. He describes how being in a producer group means that he must be increasingly reflexive in himself:

"I think in business you can improve yourself like, you know. I like that, being able to do that, proving to yourself that you can learn from your mistakes and make better decisions... I don't think I'm a perfect person or anything but I think it's a thing I'm learning, you know, because

in my younger days I would have been a more shoot from the hip kind of guy and, and I'm not so sure is that a good strategy"

John acknowledges the importance of openly recognising his shortcomings, showing a willingness to work on them. He is cognisant of 'strategy' when dealing with other people, deeming it superior from being a 'shoot from the hip kind of guy'. In addition, in his role in the producer group, John is also very aware that he must adapt to the needs of others, and be gentler when dealing with people than he might have been in the past. He describes this in how he deals with the member of the group responsible for finances; an individual who is extremely meticulous and pays specific attention to detail:

"We've learned to understand each other is how I would describe it. I've learnt about him, and him about me and you learn that it can't always be your way, you have to allow others do things their way too, like be accommodating and that, and don't be too bullish with your way of doing things"

He is very conscious that he does not let this member down, and has learned how to be more flexible and softer in his dealings with others. John explains that he relies upon communication when dealing with others. This reflects what Peter *et al.* (2000) describe as dialogic masculinity as he measures his success and his own personal growth by the fact that he works well with others, adapts to change, and reflexively acknowledges weaknesses. John has the ability to feel resilient and tenacious in the face of many challenges, while at the same time acknowledging his weaknesses and vulnerabilities and being open to change. This builds a picture of a reconstituting self and social identity, one which adapts to change, and resists some of the constraining elements of hegemonic masculinity.

## *Case 2: Simon and share farming*

Simon is a tillage farmer, married with five young children. Simon describes life growing up on a tillage farm where he had a very happy childhood and a very positive relationship with his parents and siblings. From his mid-adolescence, it became clear to Simon that he wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become a tillage farmer. However he realised quite quickly that as a result of prices paid to the farmer in the value chain, he would struggle to provide his family with the same livelihood he had experienced growing up and that it was critical that he access more land. His primary concern was his role as a provider for his family and his resilience strategy was to enter into share farming with neighbouring landowners, typically older farmers who wished to take a step back from farming. Within these agreements Simon has been given legal permission to harvest crops on the landowners' land and in return the landowner receives a share in the profits. This phenomenon is known as share farming and it has greatly enhanced his access to land which has increased his revenue:

“We are set up here as the way my parents were, I'm only looking to live the kind of life they did. They supported our family on x acres (a small family farm), and we had a great childhood, all of us you know, we never were lacking. But the way the world is today and with prices, I've had to expand, and set up share farming agreements with others, it's just what I've had to do. Like to provide for your family through farming, it's just the reality. I wasn't going to be able to provide for my kids and family the life I knew growing up on just X acres (the same size of the original family farm)”

While he occupies a traditional stance in relation to the male as a provider; his identity is more complex and he rejects certain traditional norms of farmer masculinity. An important feature of his social identity is his business acumen and he is frustrated by those who advertise farming as 'a way of life'. He narrates how he constantly has to make difficult decisions and points out that he regularly meets with bank officials and lenders in order to secure loans to finance his farm business. This is not easy, he explains, and requires a detailed level of business planning, forecasting and presentation skills so that banks can be assured that their money is safe. Simon believes that farming has evolved to become more business-oriented and one must become increasingly professional in order to be successful:

“That advertisement that farming ‘is just a way of life’, it’s just a joke, because it’s not a way of life anymore, it’s *business*. Like if you want to have a way of life, you wouldn’t be going into the bank to deal in that kind of money, because that’s *business, business*, that’s how it is; it’s a black and white division and that’s what we are, we are black and white, and I think it’s almost insulting to me as a farmer to say that ‘it’s a way of life’, it’s not, it’s a business, and I’m very proud that we have built it up and we have a brand”

Simon is quite frustrated by those who promote farming as a way of life, arguing that it does not reflect his daily reality. He speaks with a sense of pride of what he has managed to achieve, which is adjusting his family farm into a ‘brand’ where other landowners are willing to enter into share farming with him. In his eyes he has transformed his circumstances to become a good provider for his family through farming and meet the pressing demands of contemporary agriculture. In achieving this transformation he is keen to emphasise his professionalism, challenging ‘romantic notions’ that frame farming as ‘a way of life’.

However, while Simon values deeply his professional identity and the idea of the farm as a business, he does not identify himself as an industrialised farmer fixated only upon profit maximisation and expansion. His professional, business man identity is self-defined within a socio-cultural lens; characterised by a desire to occupy the role of provider and protecting the financial security of his family. He argues that increasing scale must be balanced against what is best for his family and further business decisions will always be checked against such familial considerations. The family is the fulcrum of his life and no business decision is taken if it threatens that unit. He is very conscious of his role as a father and he speaks with a sense of regret about circumstances where expectations from business partners have forced him to miss out on certain family occasions:

“You know, it’s happened before, you’re all dressed up, ready for a day out in x shopping centre and then you get a phone call from a farmer, who wants you to harvest. And then you have to go break it to them and it’s awful... Ya, it’s very frustrating, you think ‘oh God what is my wife going to think, how will she feel, what about the kids’”

He places a significant value upon being there for his family and laments periods in his life where the farm intrudes upon family time. Family time is very valuable for Simon as is his role as father and husband:

“Just to have a total business relationship is bad you know, like that time where you actually sit back and enjoy other stuff you know...It’s not fair on your partner as well, there are other stuff out there, and it’s important to take an interest in it. So, ahm, I talk about the family like, and the kids know that we have a big bag of memories like, we go to the woods on Sunday, we bring the hot chocolate from the local petrol station, we will bring the marshmallows, we will light a fire in the woods, last year we had a great experience with the autumn leaves, you know they’ve got great experiences and memories of that, and your stockpiling their memory bank with very positive things growing up. And we go to the beach, do the Halloween things and all that, it’s very important for a child to have a very good positive experience going through life ya. But not to be spoilt either like, to enjoy it ya, but also to have a good work ethic, that is the plan for my kids ya”

There is an emphasis here upon the emotional needs of other family members and he is acutely aware of the needs of his wife and children to have a present husband and father, who can share collectively in a group of happy, familial memories. He incorporates this into his social construction of farm life.

The prioritisation of other family member’s needs resembles the dialogic masculinity described earlier and runs counter to the patriarchal desire for ultimate control. While he has worked extremely hard to support his family and to maintain his role as a provider; he has also managed to take on newer aspects of masculine identity, ones which involve caring for others, key roles associated with good parenting. We can see this as an attempt to incorporate wider discourses of ‘intensive parenting’ (Brandth and Overrein 2013), which has also enabled him to expand his outlook on the farm and to reconsider some patriarchal norms which tend to subjugate women in agriculture. An example is his discussion of succession:

“We’re looking around now, my wife and I, and we see our kids, and we’d like them to take it over some day, but you know no pressure, and it won’t necessarily be one of the lads, our

daughter, she's a phenomenon with computers, those skills on a farm today are more important than anything really, she's a very good technical mind, I'm telling you she'll pass out the lads, and she'll be given as every much an opportunity as the others"

In considering his daughter as future heir; he challenges traditional norms of patrilineal succession that is a hallmark of patriarchal family farming. He reveals an increasing openness to change and social and self identities that are continually reconstituting in the context of the ever changing realities of farm life.

### *Case 3: Brian and contract rearing*

Brian is a dairy farmer who has established a contract rearing agreement with a neighbouring farmer. Under this agreement Brian has agreed to raise replacement heifers for his neighbour's dairy herd on his land. This means that Brian is not required to milk the herd, just feed and rear the cows and once they are of a required age, they are sent back to his neighbour and added to his milking herd. This agreement suits Brian as it reduces the labour hours on milking and allows him to donate more time to another family enterprise he has developed with his wife and it also gives him more leisure and family time which he deeply values. Brian explains that farming is at the core of who he is but he explains that his father worked extremely hard all his life and did not have much time to enjoy other aspects of life. While Brian wished to remain farming, he did not want to have his whole life dictated by the demands of running a dairy herd. He also explained that his land is quite wet and in many ways unsuited for a milking herd, as they tend to be quite heavy animals and can tear up the land significantly. As a result Brian decided to develop another farm based enterprise in the early 1990s and switched to dry stock farming; rearing and fattening heifers, buying them directly from the local mart and selling them on.

However, while the farm based enterprise was quite successful, he was never really content with dry stock farming and did not really feel accepted as a beef farmer. He describes difficulties in

the local mart as he did not understand its dynamics, never really felt accepted and found it very difficult to negotiate a fair price for stock:

“Well I suppose going to the mart buying cattle you feel like a lamb being fed to the slaughter! You’d get frustrated, you’d go looking for nice quality animals and you’d get bid out of it and then you would go bidding on some other, you would end up with some very poor quality animals...”

He never really felt accepted as a beef farmer and he felt conscious that other people in the community judged him for leaving dairy farming, which is perceived as an esteemed farming enterprise not least because it is quite profitable:

“You are breaking family tradition which it was, a family tradition! I suppose the other social side of it is, you know, you become the centre of attention in rural areas when you do something like that. The community and I know people would go off and do their own thing and forget about it but in social context - ‘So Brian got out of dairy farming, what’s he going at now?’ - that kind of thing out in the community. Now that’s, and maybe that pressure is more built up in my own head than anything else but that was something that was going through my head at the time yeah... I suppose the people that were dairy farming I would enjoy chatting with them but I felt out of the loop when I didn’t have the cows”

His exit from dairy farming was tinged with regret as he felt he was breaking with the dairy tradition, which had been embedded in his family for generations. We know that the family farm is often a deeply valued family asset in rural Ireland, and a duty of custodianship remains a key factor in the male farmer narrative, placing a responsibility and pressure on male farmers’ shoulders (Ní Laoire, 2005). In Brian’s case, the contract rearing agreement has enabled him to balance his lifestyle concerns with getting back ‘inside the loop’ of his much loved dairy farming, with which he had an almost visceral connection. Through contract rearing Brian has counteracted the labour pressures placed on dairy farmers, established an agreement which gives him great flexibility in his life, while also maintaining a valued tradition in his community.

Not only was it important for him to maintain the long lineage of dairy farming; the contract rearing agreement also enabled him to perform key aspects of the rural, masculine narrative, particularly that of tending to and being in control of a dairy herd. Being entrusted with and given control over another farmer's replacement heifers engendered a deep pride in Brian; a pride increased by the fact that his partner was a highly esteemed man in the local community:

"I suppose the more honoured you would be that a person would entrust those valuable animals to you as well like so there is a bit of that there as well like. I suppose we were very lucky that X and X (his wife) chose us because what they do, they do very well and to be part of that like is good. I suppose a man said to me when I said that I was rearing for X 'Oh' he said 'you must be good so because they have high standards', I think that's the way he put it. All these things are, you see it in hindsight like, but it's good to be operating at that level yeah. ... To be even considered at that level like it was an honour and a challenge just to be at that level like, you know."

The contract rearing agreement enabled him to renegotiate a dairy farmer identity and display it publicly; one which made him feel a valued and respected herdsman within his locality. While Brian has managed to connect with certain aspects of traditional male identity, he recognises that formal cooperation requires a renegotiation of some of these roles and functions; he acknowledges for instance that there is a greater sharing of decisions and power within formal contractual agreements, which would not have been the norm previously:

"I suppose my major point there is that when you have to, from the point of view if you are a family farm the general thing is that you own animals, you own what's on the farm. That's not the case in the contracts we are in so you have another line of reporting to do and it takes a bit of head space to get around that. Yeah there is another person intimately involved in the way you run your business... the tradition would be that you have your farm and you do your own work like and there is a pride in just doing it, in doing your work the best way you can and yeah that's, it's that link, it's that dynamic. It creates another dynamic that is out of the ordinary in general farming. You probably see it with the farm partnerships there as well like two people working together, you know, every person would have their own way of doing things and it's just - And the other [thing is], when you are doing something for a long period of time and to change is just more difficult but for maybe a new generation coming up it mightn't be, it will be normal to them because that's what is done but when you are a long period of time doing something and bringing along a tradition that has been there for a lot longer than that it, there is a point and you are the centre of that point and it takes a bit of time to get accustomed to that."

Ní Laoire (2001; 2005) notes how feelings of farm independence, individuality and self-reliance imbue a sense of economic power for many male farmers, representing a traditional socio-cultural norm deeply valued in rural Ireland. Brian's comments recognise that in order for formal cooperative agreements to be successful, such male narratives need to be re-interpreted, re-negotiated and re-shaped. The loss of farm individuality and self-reliance is a significant emotional event which he was forced to accept and it required him to be increasingly open and accepting of another individual on his farm. Brian's narrative suggests that social relationships within Irish agriculture can be altered by formal resilience strategies that rely on farmers developing identities that are less dependent upon the need to be in control and self-reliant. In many ways their sense of reconstituted masculinity is dependent upon being able to work with others.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The analysis of this paper finds that new resilience strategies, in the form of JFVs, enable males to overcome socio-economic challenges. However, involvement in JFVs as fundamentally collaborative models requires relational strategies and skills such as stronger and diverse forms of business acumen. Such entrepreneurial drive is not framed only by profit maximisation. Rather, it is pursued within the context of continuing attachment to long-standing socio-cultural norms of protecting the family farm and the relationships which sustain it. However, while the contemporary farmer narratives presented in this paper evidence some traits of traditional masculinity, they also perform what Peter *et al.* (2000) refer to as dialogic masculinity. This means that they are increasingly reflexive and open to change, willing to help-seek, prioritise the needs of others and are expressive of the importance of affective relationships. To a large extent this is a consequence of the formal collaborative relations that are recognised by men as often necessary to succeed as a farming professional, while also representing an embracement of alternative gender positions amongst Irish farming males.

The narratives of the three male farmers studied reveal the wider structural changes occurring in agriculture, as the globalising trends of market agriculture make it increasingly difficult for the farm

family to survive. It is clear that challenges arising not only threaten the economic security of the family farm, but also pose existential questions for male farmers who no longer have the reliable social identity perch or crutch of hegemonic masculinity, the demise of which causes social flux and insecurity despite having been highly problematic longitudinally for all gendered identities. The narratives expressed in this paper illustrate that JFVs are not only an economic resilience strategy but a more profound resilience strategy for male farmers seeking to re-constitute meaningful and purposeful self and social identities. These identities are constituted, in part, by traditional socio-cultural attachments but also a reflexivity and greater display of affective ties. The reconstituted male identities of the three men involved in JFVs evidence a willingness to help-seek; an openness to the views and opinions of others and a prioritisation of family life and parenting as well as work/life balance.

Giddens (1991) suggests that social actors attempt to develop a life biography which provides a source of meaning and a clear sense of self-identity. The individual can increasingly determine the course of their identity through conscious choices, often achieved by an iterative disembedding and re-embedding of the self from traditional socio-cultural contexts and social identities (see also Byrne, 2003). We regard farmers' establishment of JFVs as representing not only an attempt to solidify the economic resilience of the farm household but also an attempt to re-construct a life biography of the farmer identity. This reconstituted identity actively re-invests the male farmer identity with meaningfulness and purposefulness through, for example, performance of public displays of animal husbandry, professionalism and entrepreneurialism, and re-occupying the role of 'provider' for the household. It is important to note that these traits also draw upon wider discourses of corporate masculinity by embodying corporate symbols of success displayed through increasing entrepreneurial activity and professionalism. Undoubtedly, JFVs enable farmers to re-occupy aspects of traditional roles such as the 'male as provider' but becoming the 'successful farmer' often involves taking on new roles, which are increasingly informed by a business discourse.

More flexible definitions of 'farmer' are required to support the wider roles and functions played by female and male farmers across the life course upon which family farming is ultimately reliant in the future. Evidence of 'reconstituting' male identities presented in this paper should not be

interpreted as a transition from one form of essentialised (hegemonic) masculine identity towards another essentialised (reflexive, affective) identity. Rather, it adds to existing evidence that change is taking place at the level of the self and the social among contemporary Irish farmers spanning the age spectrum and the ‘across-gender fluidity of emotional lives’ (Cleary, 2005, 156; see also McDonald *et al.*, 2014; Byrne *et al.*, 2014; Cush and Macken-Walsh, 2016; Cush *et al.*, 2017). This capacity for change is indicative of resilience, which indicates a tentatively positive vista for not only the future of family farming but for gender relations and the fulfilment of human potential on farms.

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