



## Understanding Farmer Co-operation

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## **Understanding Farmer Co-operation: Exploring practices of social relatedness and emergent affects.**

**Sophie Wynne-Jones**

***Abstract:** The potential of co-operative working within the farming sector has received increasing interest in recent years, given a range of potential benefits. However, uncertainty persists in understanding the balance between individual and collective priority, how members inter-relate and negotiate these different motivations over time, and how this connects to different forms of outcome. This paper evaluates the experiences of the Pontbren farmer co-operative in Mid-Wales (UK) to explore these issues, as an exemplar of the multiple and sometimes unexpected outcomes of co-operative activity. Here-in day-to-day practices and emotional affects are highlighted as critical elements of co-operation alongside the skills and know-how required to sustain working relations. In addition, the farmers' changing sense of self is considered to evaluate the extent to which co-operation can bring about new forms of identification. The approach outlined aims to augment existing Bourdieu-inspired readings of social learning and capital exchange with insights from the literature on social practice and diverse economies (following the work of Elizabeth Shove, J.K. Gibson-Graham and colleagues). Overall, findings demonstrate a need to frame co-operation as an emergent process which can move the individuals involved beyond preformed judgements and measures of social positioning, altering their conceptions of how to relate to others. Moreover, it is argued that the value of this relatedness needs to be understood in more expansive terms, and not only as calculable forms of 'capital'.*

**Key words:** Social Practice; Affect; Social Capital; Identity; Diverse Economies

### **Highlights**

- **Co-operation evidenced as an emergent process, with unexpected rather than pre-defined outcomes.**
- **Experience of co-operation shown to influence how actors prioritize individual and collective goals.**
- **Limitations in the conception of social capital addressed to better explore social relatedness.**
- **Emotional impacts evidenced as a critical dimension of co-operation.**
- **Co-operative norms and capacity shown to develop through day-to-day practice and routines.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The potential of co-operative and collaborative working within the farming sector has received increasing interest in recent years, given a range of potential environmental, social and economic benefits - including landscape-scale resource management and tackling socio-economic vulnerabilities and decline (Renting and Van der Ploeg 2001; Emery and Franks 2012; Prager et al. 2012; Prager 2015; Flanigan and Sutherland 2016; Tregear and Cooper 2016). Collective organising and movements founded upon the principle of co-operation have also been hailed as important mechanisms for more radical forms of agrarian change and emancipation (Borras et al. 2008; Stock et al. 2014; Van der Ploeg 2008) and connect with a wider movement for social economy (Amin ed. 2009) and post-capitalist politics (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gilbert 2014). However, co-operation is understood in diverse terms across the literature, with sometimes conflicting motivations attached.

Co-operation can be defined rather all-encompassingly as “*an exchange in which participants benefit from the encounter*” (Sennett 2012, p5), but it comes in many forms and may be formal or informal, combined with competition, or exist as a self-standing value.

Whilst there is a well-developed literature on the potential benefits and factors informing the success of farming co-operatives and collective endeavours, uncertainty persists in understanding the balance between individual and collective priority and how this relates to different forms of outcome. Emery (2015) highlights distinctions between co-operation pursued for reasons of self-interest (often, although not exclusively, economically motivated), and that which is undertaken for a range of collective gains. Prager (2015) echoes this by highlighting difficulties in securing public benefits, which are primarily identified as forms of environmental outcome, whilst ensuring sufficient drivers for private gain. Stock et al. (2014) add a further dimension by highlighting the tension between co-operation that seeks to gain a

more competitive stance *within* agricultural markets and co-operation intended to regain control *from* the dictates of structural forces. As such, uncertainty emerges over the ways in which different forms of benefit inter-relate, and whether farmers are primarily individualistically motivated in their aspirations for co-operation. Moreover, as Tregear and Cooper (2016) outline, there is a need for further interrogation of how producer co-operatives work and develop over time. This is particularly in terms of how members interact and negotiate their differing motivations, and whether existing measures of capacity and disposition, including social capital (e.g. Svendsen and Svendsen 2000) and tacit knowledges (e.g. Proctor et al. 2012), are sufficient to explain these dynamics.

This paper tackles these questions through an evaluation of the Pontbren farmer co-operative in Mid-Wales UK (see Figure 1 for location), to unpack the role and form of co-operation in their collective working. The analysis considers how co-operation has supported their successes whilst also enduring in more testing times, assessing the careful balances evident between the farmers' individual desires and their care and investment in the group. The Pontbren group have been chosen as the focus for this analysis as a useful exemplar of the multiple and often unexpected outcomes of collective working. The group have received international recognition for their work to support sustainable catchment management (Mills et al. 2011; Keenleyside 2013; Ford et al. 2016), but their initial aspirations were much simpler, driven by a need to advance more resilient production systems. Their collective working has met varying successes, gaining substantial funding support from charitable and government sources, whilst attaining high levels of publicity and visitors. But they have also experienced notable failures in their efforts to secure more financially advantageous contracts with supermarket buyers and other lucrative retail avenues. Their persistence in the face of such disappointments marks them out from other experiences (e.g. Kasabov 2015) and offers

useful insights into the dynamic of individual versus collective priority, and the place of economic drivers.<sup>1</sup>

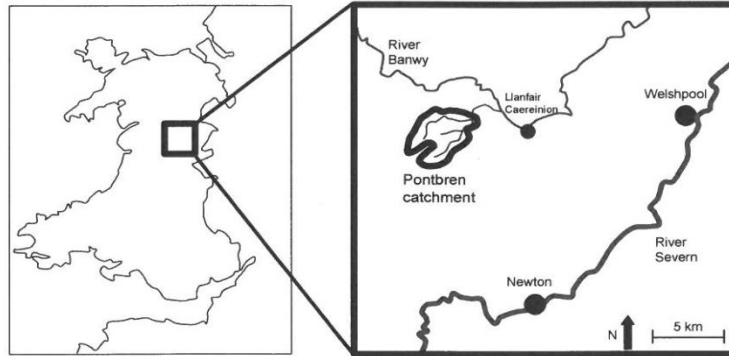


Figure 1: Location of the Pontbren Project, from Wheeler et al. 2008 p8

Understanding farmers motivations for co-operation, and the tensions associated, is important for the expectation management and efficacy of nascent groups at a time where greater funding and support is being channelled through EU Common Agricultural and Rural Development Programmes to encourage co-operative and collaborative practices (see Prager 2015 for a range of existing examples). In Wales this has manifest in the form of funding for group ventures to ensure ‘sustainable management’ of natural resources.<sup>2</sup> However, these incentives are notably vague about the benefits offered, beyond indications of a need for

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<sup>1</sup> The group have been the focus of an earlier study by CCRI in 2008 (see Mills et al. 2011) which explores factors affecting the success of agri-environmental co-operatives. Whilst there are overlaps in the two studies, they were carried out independently. This later phase of data collection was intended to gain a longer term perspective on the group dynamics and insight into later developments including efforts to advance product marketing and the impact of substantive changes in policy context. Published material from the earlier studies has been assessed as part of this evaluation, but the author has not had access to interview transcripts or other data from the earlier research.

<sup>2</sup> Scheme particulars are detailed here <http://gov.wales/topics/environmentcountryside/farmingandcountryside/cap/ruraldevelopment/wales-rural-development-programme-2014-2020/sustainable-management-scheme/?lang=en> [last accessed 15/11/16]. It should be noted that whilst any post-Brexit policy landscape is as yet unclear, funding currently allocated is set to be maintained until the end of the current CAP cycle.

larger-scale and connected working to deliver desirable outcomes, and economic stimuli appear to be the primary mechanism for inciting interest amongst farmers.

In other spheres of advocacy economic framings dominate, leading to a potentially reductive perspective on the purpose and potential of co-operative working. For example, the World Farmers' Organisation offers the following definition on their website: "*Agricultural co-operatives enable producers to realize economic benefits that they could not otherwise achieve alone*"<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a recent European Commission analysis frames agricultural co-operatives as "*...a means to consolidate their market orientation and so generate a solid market income.*" (Bijman et al. 2012, p7).<sup>4</sup>

Whilst rural scholars have previously highlighted the limitations of economic readings, championing the need for richer sociological accounts of farmer co-operation (Mooney et al. 1996 and Mooney 2004), the above examples suggest that these calls have not been fully heeded in policy and practitioner forums. There is also an emerging disparity in the framing of co-operation for business purposes and that which is sought to address environmental and social challenges (Stock et al. 2014). This has led some to caution that overemphasis on economic gains can appeal to more individualistic motivations and reduce farmers' capacity to work within groups for genuinely collective purposes (Emery 2015; Kasabov 2015). More broadly, questions have been posed over the need for cultural change within the agricultural sector to tackle farmers' individualist tendencies and the resulting lack of mobilisation against economic reforms and rural decline (Reed 2004; Van der Ploeg 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.wfo-oma.com/documents/agricultural-co-operatives.html> [last accessed 23/9/15].

<sup>4</sup> A primarily economic emphasis is further evidenced by the former English Farming Minister, Jim Paice, available online at <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2012/09/role-farming-agricultural-co-operatives>; and in the Wales Co-operative Centre's (2004) 'Farming Co-operatives a better future for farming', announced online at <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/local-news/farming-co-ops-working-2431178> [last accessed 9/9/15].

By explicitly evaluating the extent to which farmers' prioritise different benefits, and their identification with individualist versus collective goals, this paper gains better purchase on the social processes which influence their ability to co-operate. Moreover, by evaluating and enhancing the theoretical tools with which we approach these questions, the paper is intended to push beyond some of the impasses outlined above. The paper is structured as follows: in the following Section 2 different theories and rationales for co-operation are considered as a means to position the approach of the paper; Section 3 then introduces the data and methods, before the findings and analysis are presented in Sections 4 and 5.

## **2. UNDERSTANDING FARMERS' CO-OPERATION**

Western society is increasingly structured to promote individualism as opposed to collectivism, as a result of the dominant neoliberal governance framework which celebrates individual liberty and achievement. This has been argued to deepen social difference and alienation and reduces our potential for interdependence (Hardt and Negri 2005; Sennett 2012). Responding to this, there is an increasing counter-movement which advocates the potential of co-operation and communing/commoning (Douzinas and Zizek et al. 2010; Wall 2014; Gilbert 2014); often as part of a move towards diverse, post-capitalist or social economies (Gibson-Graham 2006; Amin ed. 2009). Understanding the development, maintenance and experiences of co-operative ventures in their multiple forms is, therefore, of interest to a wide spectrum of scholars.

Agricultural co-operation has a long history with farmers coming together to increase their relative political and economic power, but also as a form of neighbourly mutual aid (Smith



1961). More recently this has extended to encompass more expansive aims: to foster resilience to the pressures of debt, erratic and uneven food markets, environmental uncertainty and urban dominance (Friedmann 1995; Wolf and Bonnano 2013). However, there are marked differences in the experiences and actions of farmers in different countries and between the actions of ‘conventional’ farmers and those associated with ‘alternative’ movements (see e.g. Borras et al 2008; Wittman et al. 2010; Stock et al. 2014; Forney and Haberli 2016). In the UK, whilst there are strong traditions attached to co-operative behaviours, levels of formal co-operation are much lower than in other EU countries (Cogeca 2010). Woods (2015) has argued that the cultural framing of the British countryside has discouraged political mobilisation, and the alignment of farming with national interests up until the early 90’s ensured that farming groups did not engage with more militant forms of organising (see also Reed 2004). Today it is arguable that agricultural policy and structural pressures enhance individualisation, through increasing competition, supply chain restructuring, centralisation, regulatory burden, debt and rural fragmentation. All of which undermine the success of co-operative ventures (Svendson and Svendson 2000; Van der Ploeg 2008; Stock et al. 2014; Kasabov 2015).

Unravelling the varying successes of farmer co-operatives, the literature emphasises the level and forms of social connectedness within groups and to supporting networks, commonly described in terms of social capital (Svendson and Svendson 2000; Flanigan and Sutherland 2016), as well as highlighting the different resources, knowledges and skills individuals bring to these groupings (see Tregear and Cooper 2016 for a good review). Other factors include the degree of embeddedness within a locale or community, the sense of identification with a group or unifying cause, and the frequency and depth of connections (Prager 2015).

With regards to the inter-relation of different forms of benefit, Svendsen and Svendsen (2000) assert that economic profit is necessary for social capital development, but that “formalized economic relations must not be isolated from informal social relations” (p82). Mooney (2004) goes further by arguing for the necessarily social (and in some instances political) foundations of economic relations within co-operatives, putting forward the notion of productive ‘frictions’ which emerge through collective interaction. Recent research by Flanigan and Sutherland (2016), however, questions whether social capital can be substituted by economic capital in the process of group maturation, without undermining strength and cohesiveness. Encompassing environmental dimensions, Prager (2015) outlines that synergies can exist between a range of different benefits, although she does not specify whether the initial motivations matter. More broadly, it would appear that economic motivations cannot be conceptualised in simplistic or isolated terms. Rather they need to be understood as part of a more holistic form of decision-making which include social and temporal dimensions, and whether actions enable resilience in more systematic terms (Riley 2008; Ingram et al. 2012; Niska et al. 2012; Wynne-Jones 2013).

## **2.1 Individualism and Collectivism**

Despite these areas of growing clarity, some questions remain. In a recent paper, Tregear and Cooper (2016) push for a more in-depth interrogation of *how* group members inter-relate. Here they question whether successful co-operation is an unproblematic outcome of stable networks with harmonious relations, or whether we need to consider other skills and dispositions, proposing a focus on ‘co-operative know-how’ (as distinct from other forms of know-how and tacit knowledges discussed by Proctor et al. 2012). That is, a more values-based orientation that enables an appreciation of what collective working can achieve and a commitment to that as an organising principle, which informs and enhances the skills

necessary for this. However, it is not clear whether this corresponds with specific political orientations, or ideological beliefs, as appears to be the case in some discussions of the social or diverse economy (e.g. Cornwell 2012; Amin ed. 2009). Nor is it clear whether such ‘know-how’ is stable or dynamic, and how this corresponds to other aspects of social learning. Again, work on social and diverse economies offer a useful comparator here, providing insight into how members actively develop an orientation towards co-operative behaviours and reconfigure their politics (Cornwell 2012; Gibson-Graham 2006).

An important finding from Tregear and Cooper’s (2016) research is that co-operative know-how is “not absent in contexts where self-reliant behaviours are the norm” (p109). This connects with the longstanding question raised in the literature of whether farmers are inherently disposed towards *self*-reliance and independent action, rather than collective and collaborative working (Emery and Franks 2012; Stock and Forney 2014). Specifically, uncertainty persists around whether autonomy, as an apparently defining farming character trait, poses a substantive socio-cultural barrier to co-operation; or, as some have argued, it is an important driver for farmers coming together in co-operative groupings (e.g. Renting and Van der Ploeg 2001; Stock et al. 2014).

Unravelling these complexities, Emery (2015) suggests there has been a conflation of ‘independence’ with individualistic behaviour, which erodes farmers’ ability to be independent from structural forces. Here independence is about self-direction and autonomy, which does not necessitate individuals to isolate themselves or refuse interactions which can enable greater capacity to be self-determining, and free from dictates of corporate or legislative actors. Individualism, by contrast, is a preference for isolated individual working.

Emery (2015) argues that it is possible for farmers to have greater independence by being *interdependent* through co-operation, whereas individualism can erode this capacity.

Similar understandings are echoed in Stock and Forney's (2014) work on autonomy.

Elaborating upon their arguments in Stock et al. (2014) the authors outline a distinction between 'neoliberal autonomy' and 'actual autonomy', where-in farmers either respond to the pressures of neoliberal reform by "*buying into the rhetoric that wealth creation is the one and only way to value oneself and one's community*" or, seek to "*value autonomy as a key to survival and resistance*" (Stock and Forney 2014, p162). This is then used to explain motivations for collective behaviour as a means to enact these different modes of autonomy. Here they compare the working of large agri-business co-operatives, as a manifestation of neoliberal autonomy, with the experience of peasant movements motivated by the principles of food sovereignty, seen to represent actual autonomy (Stock et al. 2014). As such, a desire for autonomy is not seen to counter an impetus to co-operate with others and instead can provide an important motivation; but it is necessary to distinguish between different manifestations of autonomy. What their cases also highlight is the question of whether such understandings and enactments of co-operation are determined by fixed character traits, or whether they can be reworked and reinterpreted. Specifically, they encourage us not to essentialise the behaviours of different groupings and contend that autonomy is a signifier or tool which enables the positioning of motivations and organising principles.

## **2.2 The Performativity of Co-operation**

Developing Stock et al's (2014) and Stock and Forney's (2014) arguments by drawing on insights from the diverse-economies literature (Gibson-Graham 2006; Amin ed. 2009; Cornwell 2012), these preferences for co-operative action (and our very understanding of

them) can be seen as culturally defined and reinforced, with ongoing opportunities for reinterpretation and continuing negotiation. Exemplifying this, Emery (2015) focuses on the stabilisation of ideology through the deployment of rhetoric (aligning independence with individualism). Building on Gibson-Graham (2006) and Shove et al. (2012) we can also draw out the role of social practice, and the inherent performativity of identity norms and subject orientation to explain how particular assumptions and behavioural codes are normalised in other day to day experiences and actions (see also Sennett 2012).

Here—in it is argued that knowledge, ideas and meaning are inseparable from physical, bodily acts and material interactions; that doing co-constitutes our knowing. This is not just individual habits and routines, but the way in which actions are imbricated in a social fabric (Shove et al. 2012). For instance, Cornwell (2012) outlines the importance of co-operative decision-making processes and the routine experience of participating in such forums as a means through which norms and expectations can be recomposed. There are clear overlaps here with Bourdieu-inspired readings of what constitutes ‘good farmer’ behaviour (see e.g. Sutherland and Burton 2011; Flanigan and Sutherland 2016), in terms of processes of judgement required and the stabilisation of ‘habitus’. But Shove et al. (2012) push us further towards a more materially focused analysis, to understand the composition of bodily routines, objects and spatialities of social practice.

In addition, Gibson-Graham (2006) assert the importance of emotions and affect as part of these experiences; a point that is similarly iterated in Gilbert’s (2014) work on the political potential of collective organising. Drawing on a range of theorists including Foucault, Connolly and Massumi, Gibson-Graham (2006) encourage greater attention to the role of emotional response in the reworking of behavioural norms. As such, it is argued that new

habits are not simply inscribed through repetition but that affective dimensions also play a constitutive role. In these terms, we not only ‘work on ourselves’ in a purely conscious modes self-reflection, but are also influenced by more sub-conscious forms of affirmation such as joy, fear, pride and esteem.<sup>5</sup> These affects can either block or open up new patterns of thinking. Again the physicality of the body is essential to our capacity for knowing.

This approach connects with recent analyses of the farming self as an unfolding and dialogic process, which counters notions of essential character traits: “*the self is stable but unfixed and thus takes constant work and judgement to maintain*”, hence “*identity... is a doing, not a fixed sense of a role*” (Stock and Forney 2014, p161). Taking this further, we are prompted to explore how co-operative experiences impact upon this dynamic process of identity stabilisation and negotiation. Moreover, we can question how collective identities are negotiated, the self-positioning involved, how change occurs and challenges dealt with. Despite emerging work in this vein addressing worker co-operatives (Cornwell 2012), this has not yet been considered in a farming context (although Anderson et al. 2014 are informed by the diverse economies literature). Discussions of social learning within farming groups (see Prager 2015) certainly suggests that this type of repositioning is happening, but the explicit negotiation of individual versus collective gains and the modes of identification associated have not been fully explored.

Together the points considered here demonstrate a need for analysis focusing on the individual versus collective dynamics of group working, in terms of how this impacts on the

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<sup>5</sup> The extent to which such emotions and affective responses are seen to be sub or partially conscious is an area of continued debate see e.g. Pile 2010. Moreover the distinction between emotions and affect is similarly a point of ongoing discussion, with emotions typically seen as more consciously realised experiences, whilst affect is a more spontaneous and emergent quality.

stabilisation and negotiation of the farming self and the social practices and affective responses which inform this.

### **3. DATA & METHODS**

The data for this paper was originally collected in an evaluation for the Welsh Government in 2013 (XXXX), assessing the experiences of the Pontbren farmers, to ascertain lessons for policy learning. A qualitative approach was taken involving individual interviews with all but one of the group (9 total<sup>6</sup>), two group discussions and several phone conversations to clarify and amend the resulting report. Data collection was undertaken over an intensive period of three weeks enabling farm walks and repeat visits to occur in which respondents and the researcher could become familiarised. Areas of questioning conformed to a schedule agreed with the Welsh Government, although a semi-structured conversational style was pursued to allow room for spontaneity and attention to topics raised by the farmers. Discussion of co-operation was advanced as a specifically defined topic, but also arose in wider questioning around the benefits and disbenefits of the project and the processes of change experienced.

Family members were included in the group meetings but not individual interviews<sup>7</sup>. Five key stakeholders were also interviewed, including a third sector funder, facilitator, supporting technical and policy staff, and scientists who worked with the group. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. Three half-day advocacy meetings between policy makers, group members and the author were also held both before and after the data collection for the 2014 report, where-in further group dynamics and experiences were recorded.

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<sup>6</sup> One group member was not able to participate in individual interviews due to pressures from full-time work off the farm, and the timing of interviews coinciding with silage making meaning that evenings were taken up with farm work.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews were organised with individuals who self-identified as ‘the farmer’ and/or the person most involved in the Pontbren group within the household. This approach was not imposed by the interviewer but chosen by the respondents themselves, partly due to time and work pressures.

## **4. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS**

The following sections explore, firstly, the farmers' motivations for coming together as a group, their levels of collective identification, and persisting areas of individualist behaviour.

The second part then turns to explore the processes through which co-operation was developed, including the farmers' changing practices, skills and emotions.

### **4.1 Identifying Collectivism and Individualism**

#### **4.1.1 *Motivations – Resilience and Autonomy***

The group began as three adjacent farms in 1997, with support from a professional facilitator, and the remaining seven were invited to join in 2001, formally forming a business co-operative in 2003. This process was farmer-led and not orchestrated by outside agencies. They came together to increase the resilience of their farming businesses acknowledging the spiralling insecurity of high input costs and an uncertain future for farm subsidies. This involved increasing hedges and habitat on their farms, to provide shelter for livestock as part of a broader shift away from productivist approaches. They also experimented with reductions in livestock numbers, changing to hardier breeds, using woodchip as a cheaper locally sourced form of bedding, and developing strategies for product marketing. As such, their aims were more multi-faceted and open-ended than groups instigated with an explicit objective for product marketing or processing (see e.g. Kasabov 2015; Tregear and Cooper 2016).

The choice to become a co-op was a practical administrative decision, enabling them to handle group finances, rather than an ideologically informed one grounded in the valorisation of co-operative strength. Only one of the farmers demonstrated a clear affinity for co-operative ideals, asserting the potential for co-operative structures to benefit the wider agricultural sector. Nonetheless, the group's rationale echoes classic co-operative arguments for economies of



scale and collective strength (e.g. Bijman 2012). This included the financial benefits of bulk purchases, as well as innovations and savings achieved by experimenting together. For example, the scale and structure of the group enabled them to access sufficient timber resources to make wood chipping (for livestock bedding) a viable exercise. Their status as a group was also pivotal to attaining grant funding:

*“There are cost savings by having everybody together... It’s easier to roll something out to ten and it’s better to show when there is so many acres involved. On your own, we are nothing really.” CL<sup>8</sup>*

Economic motivations were, therefore, a clear driver but these were not envisaged in a singular or short-term manner, as has otherwise been the case when groups have been undermined (see Kasabov 2015 and Emery 2015).

Working together was also seen as a means to overcome the inflexibility of agri-environmental schemes available to them as individuals. Together they could pursue alternate strategies that allowed them to make the changes they wanted, hence collective agency is linked to a desire for autonomy (c.f Stock and Forney 2014’s notion of ‘freedom to’). In particular, they emphasised the importance of being able to decide where to undertake measures, such as planting of hedges, based on their experiences of the prevailing weather and topography. Being a group afforded them decision-making powers which they would not have had as individuals entering a government-led scheme. They were also able to audit everything within the group and stressed how critical this dynamic was to ensuring good standards were met.

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<sup>8</sup> All interviews were undertaken in June 2013, code initials are applied here to differentiate between the respondents.

*“...if anybody came or scrutinised it we could say ‘we decided ourselves...’ and the work we did was policed by other members just to check that it was good enough. We all felt that if somebody cut a corner it would reflect back on the whole group.” CL*

The expression of autonomy considered here is seen as a desire for ‘actual’ rather than ‘neoliberal’ autonomy (Stock et al. 2014), in that the farmers wished to take back control, to escape from the systematic pressures and associated vulnerability placed upon them.

#### ***4.1.2 Collective Benefits and Identification***

Unpacking their motivations, we see the beginnings of a collective sense of identity; a sense of esteem rooted in a conception of themselves as a wider unit and a consciousness of the benefits achieved together. Whilst they were all individually interested in habitat improvements, the group gave them support and encouragement to undertake work that they would not have done otherwise. This included emotional dimensions such as a sense of camaraderie and pride:

*“I wouldn’t have done it on my own I don’t think, but the push on... and looking at [my neighbour’s farm] thinking he’s really getting on...” G*

*“Everybody’s projects got bigger... and perhaps you might have thought of doing it over a ten year period but we ended up fast forwarding and doing it in three years.”*

CL

They also boasted how people visiting the area would remark on the visible changes at the landscape scale:

*“People have passed around this area and commented ‘you must be in some scheme’.  
They had noticed that it is not just one farm but we’ve all done a bit.” MG*

This compares with the higher environmental standards achieved by farmers’ co-operatives in the Netherlands (Renting and Van der Ploeg 2001) and affirms the importance of gaining ownership over agri-environmental measures (Forney 2016). The development of a group was an important mechanism for collective identification, through alignment with cultural norms at the outset (i.e. using hedges for livestock management), and then enhanced by sense of connection to place and community developed through activities that were more visible and effective at scales above the level of a singular farm (cf. Strauss and Darnhofer 2015; Forney 2016).

The group similarly offered a means of experimenting with business activities, again giving the farmers both opportunity and confidence. An indicator of their growing inter-dependency was the increased level of informal labour sharing and mutual aid reported.

*“Respondent: in the years gone by people used to help each other harvest and stuff,  
we’ve almost gone back to it now...”*

*Interviewer: has that increased?*

*Respondent: Yes, well you see each other and you say ‘what are you boys doing next  
week? Any chance of a hand?’ It’s very informal.” CL*

Most notable is the very relaxed stance towards finance exhibited here:

*“It’s quite a good working relationship because it’s not an actual invoice at the end of the year. They all do that silaging, [one of the farmers] takes the winter keep at [the other’s] place and then...They agree a trade, they agree dates, they do that okay. The pressure is on when the weather isn’t good but you know everybody is relaxed and calm.” PL*

These sentiments contrast with the experiences of other groups where concerns about an equitable exchange of time and resources have undermined farmers’ capacity to engage with one another (see Emery 2015). In particular, the reference to the threat of bad weather emphasises the potential for things to go sour. Yet the assertion that ‘*everyone is relaxed and calm*’ shows the level of trust and commitment present. Putting this in context, mutual aid and labour sharing is diminishing across the UK, or else being formalised in a way that depends increasingly on economic exchange to support relations (Flanigan and Sutherland 2016). This is potentially exacerbated as pressures of off-farm work, leads to a heightened sense of anxiety and individualism as farmers do not physically see each other. A greater sense of competition and business pressures similarly reduces the potential for farmers to develop trusting relationships (Emery 2015; Kasabov 2015).

In contrast, the Pontbren farmers state that they do not perceive each other as direct competition, they share business information and compare accounts. Some members have even looked to the group to consider options for the succession of their businesses when they did not have children of their own. Moreover, they note that this is not something they would have done before, but through the course of the project their interactions have fostered a new way of relating and shifted the boundaries of what they would share and disclose.

Perhaps the most notable instance of their commitment to each other was in their experience of failure to secure a favourable supermarket contract. Whilst such negative experiences have undermined other nascent groups (Kasabov 2015), the Pontbren farmers persisted. In explanation, they had become grounded in over five years of collective working, and realised considerable success in the pursuit of other goals. Consequently, when the promise of more explicit economic gains fell through there was a level of instituted commitment to mitigate against the ensuing disappointment. Moreover, it is notable that their discussions of this failure squarely place the blame with the supermarket, and the vagaries of the competitive food system, which served as a neatly definable opponent against which they could collectively align. As such, there was no sense in which any of them could have achieved a better deal individually (as has been observed elsewhere). Rather, in this moment of failure they were again stronger by turning to each other to develop a new strategy. This further affirms a reading of ‘actual autonomy’ and prompts us to attend to the place of economic motivations in other instances. Reflecting in more general terms, the farmers offered the following insights:

*“It would be a job to attribute pounds, shilling and pence to be honest, because it’s doing things that we probably wouldn’t have done - because there wasn’t a direct income [...] We are still having meetings and we are still doing our social things so if something comes up we can possibly take advantage and if not, then not. You can’t go into something like Pontbren just because you think it is going to be some money today...” CL*

Here the farmer offers a nuanced stance on their expectations. They show they are prepared to be patient and do not expect immediate benefit. Equally, they indicate that clearly definable economic returns are not a requirement, without which they would not see the

worth of their participation. This reflection suggests that there are benefits, but they are not easy to count and certainly not in the short-term. Instead they manifest as farm system improvements and may have effect at the household or community rather than business level – factors that all work to support *collective* operations. This resonates with points made in Section 2, that farmer decisions should be understood in more systematic terms that account for interdependencies across the farm. This reflection was far from an isolated instance, with similar sentiments echoed by others in the group.

#### **4.1.3 Persisting Individualism**

In discussing the benefits ascertained, the farmers also revealed important distinctions regarding the extent of their collective identification. This is demonstrated in the following:

*“The project made you aware of what you could get out of it. I’m not talking about money, money is of, well obviously it’s of interest, but what I’m saying is this is worth more than money...This isn’t just financial...You went, you saw and you thought ‘mm’ I’d like that... That would benefit the farm, benefit my animals, the two things that are closest to you...”* RA

Here, whilst we see a rejection of economic benefits as the primary driver, the farmer outlines a notably individual framing. Yet this concern, and the sense of self expressed, is related to ‘the farm’ further affirming the importance of this holistic unit as a locus for decision making, as opposed to more divided notions of individual wealth accumulation. In other instances, the same interviewee again infers a more individualistic orientation in their framing of reciprocal benefits:

*“This brought you closed together and that was an excellent thing for me because I felt that if I could do a little bit of something then it meant then that if I needed something I could ask back. I didn’t feel a nuisance whereas before I would’ve done and I probably would not have asked...”* RA

This return to individualism, both as a priority but also an assumed social norm (Emery 2015), was similarly evident in comments from the rest of the group: *“We still like to be individuals don’t we? That is the trouble with farming that farmers like to do their own thing...”* PL. However, as Mooney (2004) asserts, it is exactly in such potentially contradictory experiences and rationalisations that fruitful learning can occur. Rather than undermining the group, this friction between individual and collective needs can create avenues for the realisation of co-operative ‘know how’. So in these spaces of tension between the individual and the collective new openings could occur.

In other instances, however, it was apparent that individualistic forms of attention and control did need to be maintained, suggesting limits on the degree to which compromise and collective identification could extend. This was most evident in relation to choices about where to undertake tree-planting and other environmental interventions on their land. Some stakeholders hoped that the group could consider environmental dynamics at the landscape scale. However, the farmers were adamant that individuals must make decisions about their own land:

*“Everybody decided what they wanted themselves. No, you couldn’t go to somebody else and tell them where you want to put the hedge that would be madness, well that*

*would be downright cheeky I would have thought. If somebody came and told me oh you have to put one there, no thank you.” TL*

To clarify, whilst as a group they collectively agreed on what types of action were appropriate (tree planting, destocking etc.), specific choices about the level, intensity and location of these measures were then decided at the farm household level. This reflects a deference to individual’s knowledge of their land and an acknowledgement that there was considerable diversity in group members’ needs. This demonstrates important differences between farmer co-operatives and other forms of worker collectives where shared space comprises part of their experience. For instance, Cornwell (2012) discusses how the collective (re)production of workers space (whether a factory, shop or space of service provision) can redefine their relationships towards each other and themselves. The subject position of being a worker coming into a privately held space is reworked. Control is attained and choices made which redevelop the individual as part of a spatially expressed collective enterprise: “the qualitative character of an economic space is constituting and constituted by subjects who participate in producing it for themselves and for others”. (p732)

For the Pontbren farmers this was different, they all owned their land prior to becoming part of a collective. Their property relations did not change and they did not reconfigure the political-economy of their production processes to a substantive level. Similarly for other farming groups, even when agricultural produce is brought to sale through a collective enterprise it is often done so from an individual farm unit; and the routines surrounding production do not disrupt this sense of individual ownership, responsibility and control over the farm. However, some co-operatives (often dairy) do work together to process their produce, and collectively buy equipment (and space) to do this which enables a deeper level



of sharing and spatial expressions of their co-operative behaviours (see e.g. Forney and Haberli 2016). These differing spatial and material expressions of co-operation, and the impact on farmers' persisting desire for individual control, suggest important areas for further research.

## **4.2 Becoming Co-operative**

### **4.2.1 Practising Co-operation**

Despite the limits observed, it is apparent that change has occurred within the group. The following section will focus in on how this happened. Analyses of longstanding groups can give the impression that stability and success are an unproblematic emergence of regular interaction (Tregear and Cooper 2016). In Pontbren it was clear that the frequency and intensity of meetings was important. However, the format and regularity of their interactions markedly changed overtime, supporting a shift in certain dispositions and orientations. As a self-selected group, the farmers knew each other prior to the group's formation but the diminished social fabric of the rural community in which they resided and the routines of their working lives had led to more distanced relations.

*"...we're neighbours but we wouldn't really see so much of them. They do their own thing...The way things have gone, people don't interact as much as they used to." CL*

*"The last generation, chapel was their thing. They used to go twice on a Sunday... I think here I could see that Pontbren has really brought us ten neighbours really close together. It was like what I'm sure chapel was for my parents." MG*

Initiating the group created a mechanism through which collective interface and exchange could be explored and made routine, and allowed them to suspend norms to which they had become accustomed. As the comments above indicate, the practices established through Pontbren had a historical reference point (see also p19 *'in years gone by'*). They were not entirely 'new' forms of behaviour, but rather had established judgements associated that framed them in a positive nostalgic light. As such, any transition associated was not entirely into new ground (c.f. Shove et al. 2012). These practices involved formal meetings to agree on actions, strategy and administration, with specific roles and responsibilities allocated and a rota established around who would host the meeting and provide refreshments and hospitality each time. Here the cultural reference point of meeting around the kitchen table connected them to expectations of generosity and openness. This then led into less formalised interactions, as awareness and care for one another was nurtured and became more habitual. Practices of thinking would extend to encompass how others within the group were tackling a particular issue rather than approaching it in isolation; whether this was regular tasks such as harvesting or unexpected issues such as weather extremes or health problems. As earlier excerpts suggest, this was due to a new-found confidence that members would not judge each other as 'a nuisance', but also because they became more conditioned to seeing and considering one another.

Notably, these practices did not just involve the farmers, but often included their families and wider community. Some members in particular were very involved in the community council and associated events, which further enhanced the activities of the group:

*"People used to be very focused on the business and no time for socialising... business was everything. All of a sudden a community event like a show, dinner and anything*

*like that, I would say 60-70% of the people within the group would support those type of things now...” PL*

The farmers also demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and service to the community. For example, by emphasizing the multiplier effect of employing local contractors with the grant funding secured, and inviting them to share in subsequent celebrations of the project’s achievement. Consequently, their social ties were not only within the group but extended beyond, enhanced through celebrations, forms of esteem and relations of care. The group was not just about going to meeting to gain things for the business, but a wider realisation of community renewal and vibrancy. Whilst such embeddedness within a locale is not always necessary for group success (Tregear and Cooper 2016), it has been emphasised in recent observations where farming and community rejuvenation have been seen to work in synergy (Strauss and Darnhofer 2015; Stock, Carolan and Rosin eds. 2015).

#### ***4.2.2 Affective Experiences***

These changes are not simply seen as the product of repeated behaviours, rather the re-composition noted was explicitly related to forms of affect which Gibson-Graham (2006) outline as a critical factor to enable and affirm new patterns of behaviour. As such, we need to pay attention to more than just the intellectual rationalisation and include reflection on visceral and expressive responses<sup>9</sup>. This is nicely captured in the following discussions:

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<sup>9</sup> By the very nature of undertaking interview-based research, there are some limitations on the level of sub-conscious response and influence that one can access. As the excerpts here suggest the emotional impacts have been consciously recognised by respondents after the events. Whereas ethnographic research could capture these emergences as they occurred. Nonetheless, there is also a sense that some of these realisations came out in the interviews and had not been fully considered before. Interviews are not, therefore, seen as a moment of relaying a pre-formulated understanding, but an ‘event’ in and of themselves where understanding is co-produced.

*“The main thing that’s kept us involved? We’ve had a lot of fun. Good God back in the foot and mouth time we were the only people we were seeing...we’ve had a few barbeques...plenty of social evenings. We’ve had fun.” GG*

*Interviewer: didn’t that [the amount of meetings] put you off at all?*

*Respondent: No strangely enough, no. The tea was quite good... and the social side it was something to cheer everybody up a bit I suppose and something to look forward to.” TF*

Being ‘cheered up’, comforted, having fun, experiencing moments of laughter, hope, anticipation, pride and sorrow, are some of the many emotional indicators relayed in the farmers’ interviews. Co-operating was not just something that enabled them to achieve strength and opportunity; something they could consciously evaluate or enter into to attain pre-formulated gains. Their emotions played an essential role in aligning them with co-operative norms. Despite the drudgery and frustration of long meetings where individuals might not agree or see immediate personal benefits (see also Cornwell 2012), members would persist buoyed by moments of positive affect. Moreover, whilst group members felt a clear sense of anger and despondency in moments of failure, this was remediated by the jubilancy and excitement of celebrity visits from Royalty and overseas students which they often recalled in conversation.

Discussions of social capital emphasise the importance of trust, loyalty and measures of competency and social standing, they also consider distinctions in the strength of ties, but they rarely extend to consider the affective work encompassed. For example, developing trust can require a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty; it also requires expressions of care which

may be more intimate, showing a deep personal knowledge of and attention to a person. Trust within the social capital literature is discussed as a measure by which farmers seem to make a rational assessment of character or the sensibility of an exchange. Trust is banked and traded, and analytical focus is on the way it supports economic relatedness. In these terms alone we lose sight of the subconscious (even irrational) work involved. We can also overlook farmers' esteem and dependencies as something which supports their wellbeing in more holistic terms. Farmer depression is well-documented (Fraser et al. 2005), and the group make many references to the ways in which their renewed connectedness enabled them to cope with testing periods such as the 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease. In other aspects of farmers' experience, emotional dimensions have received greater interest, including research into the impact of animal disease and wellbeing (Convery et al. 2005) and choices over whether to leave farming (Riley 2011). Emotional geographies more broadly are a burgeoning literature with clear connections to economic formations and identity (Pile 2010). Further consideration of these factors in the experiences of producer co-operatives is therefore recommended.

#### **4.2.3 Know-how**

Finally, the role and development of co-operative 'know-how' is important to consider, exploring the notion posited by Tregear and Cooper (2016). Whilst it is not clear at the outset that the Pontbren group show such a disposition, or that it has been instrumental in their decisions to work together, there are indications that they have begun to learn this:

*“Some individuals found it hard in the beginning because it has to be an element of giving and taking. With them being individual businesses there was a tendency, 'well*

*this is how I've done it', and they realise well to fit into the group they have to work with that."* PL

Here, it is difficult to differentiate between the inter-personal skills and capacities required – give and take, listening and compromise – and the values supporting and prompting these. What is clear, is that they are skills and values which develop. There was not the necessity for them in their previous (individual) modes of business: *'they realise'* something has changed in their new arrangement, and new ways of working are required. This is not easy, they are not coming into the group with a strong ideological commitment to collective institutions, or previous experience / awareness of co-operatives to enable this. This is different from the experiences of Tregear and Cooper (2016; see also Sligo and Massey 2007 and Forney this issue).

Articulating their understanding of the group's dynamics, they contend that reaching agreement was important, decisions could not be imposed on 'outlying' members (this was similarly affirmed in Cornwell 2012).

*"As a group everybody's got to be happy before we do anything. There's no point six of us want one thing and four want another thing that will never be a group. We all have to be happy in one way or another and surely that's why we've been able to survive..."* TL

There was some confusion, however, as to whether their ability to reach consensus was a product of *pre-existing* like-mindedness. If so, there is a sense that reaching agreement is not a challenging process of alignment, and for groups more disparate in experience and

aspiration this would be difficult or undermining. Considering comments around the *assumed* extent of the group's commonality would suggest that this has been relatively unproblematic: "*we worked together one hundred percent and if you're going to do it you've got to find partners that are of the same thoughts as yourself*" (RA). Objectively, however, there are notable differences between them in age and focus given one is a dairy farmer, one a specialist pedigree breeder, one runs holiday lets, and one has diversified into renewables.

Interrogating this further, there was a strong sense that different views *would* arise and that compromise and negotiation was necessary, agreement did not simply occur from the outset.

*"We are all individual farmers at the end of the day; what I think is great [someone else] might think is a load of nonsense but that's life isn't it."* TF

This is clearly echoed in Cornwell's (2012) account of other co-operative enterprise (see also Amin ed. 2009). Commitment was required not simply to listen, to wait ones turn to get a say, to go through the motions, but to understand *how* to work with different members in different ways.

*"We knew who was stiff and who was lenient, and all of us are stiff in our own ways in different topics. Then you've just got to believe and get on with it and do and compromise. That's the word, everybody compromised to one way or another."* TL

What is important here is the conviction that *everybody* compromised, there wasn't a sense of individual forfeit but mutual and shared amendments, although some farmers expressed a greater ability to do this:

*“It’s difficult, you can’t exactly replicate it... Sometimes I can go away from a meeting and it’s been of no benefit to me at all because there’s nothing that would help me... unless you go you don’t know really do you? I think that has sort of been my attitude to it really. You can imagine that some people would go and say ‘It’s not for me’ and chuck the towel in straight away...” CL*

Elsewhere, producers have been shown to compromise themselves much more substantially – for example by putting forward more produce to sustain a group in times of need, making themselves vulnerable to ensure continued collective strength (Tregear and Cooper 2016). The Pontbren farmers’ actions do not indicate such a depth of belief, or such a developed sense of co-operative know-how, but the quote here does show a strong sense of commitment. The farmer is aware that their own behaviour and judgement does not comply with an assumed norm. Comparing such insights with the work of Gibson-Graham (2006) and Cornwell (2012), such personal struggles appear as a common theme in the workings of more diverse economic institutions and relations. People have to re-negotiate themselves, their habituated norms, and what they perceive to be expected actions and orientations, as a primary arena for change to occur. This is more than a set of skills, it is about recomposing, or at least suspending, an identity norm – testing the parameters of what feels comfortable in your presentation of yourself both externally and in terms of internal reflections.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This analysis has explored the experience of farmer co-operation, through the case of the Pontbren group in Mid Wales, highlighting the negotiation of individual and collective gains. The importance of conceptualising benefits as interwoven, rather than singularly defined (as



economic *or* environmental *or* social), is evidenced with many emergent and unexpected outcomes serving to support and buffer the group when some desired outcomes were not realised. This affirms Mooney's (2004) arguments around the productive nature of co-operation, and how the 'frictions' involved can enhance innovation and long-term adaptability. This paper takes a closer look at these frictions through a focus on the routine aspects of group interaction and the farmers' emotional responses, to see if they result in a shift in farmers' sense of themselves.

Transgressions beyond instituted norms of individualism are considered as a repositioning of one's sense of self and a realisation of new ways of being and doing. The work of emotions and affect here-in has been a critical component of the group's development, affirming Mooney's (2004) claim that co-operation as an objective inheres through the process of co-operating (2004, p92). As such, a key of argument of this paper is the need to frame co-operation, and the forms of 'know-how' and identity norms involved, as a more emergent process which can move the individuals involved beyond their preformed judgements and measures of social positioning. Consequently we see that cooperation, even with initially modest aims, can fundamentally alter peoples' conceptions of how to relate to others. Moreover, it is relations in and of themselves that are valued and not only the calculable benefits that thinking in terms of capital would allow.

However, there are limits to the farmers' levels of co-operation, particularly in terms of a continued desire for control over their own land. This raises questions about the spatial and material differences experienced. Whilst some groups undergo more substantive levels of re-composition, it is notable that the extent of their relatedness is much greater than witnessed here (e.g. Cornwell 2012). This is potentially critical for farmer groups where work spaces

remain divided, limiting the level of reconfiguration that takes place. Further evaluation of a range of group types and experiences is therefore recommended to explore the different practices and spaces involved.

Overall, these findings have enabled reflection on the theoretical tools used to evaluate co-operation. Elsewhere in the literature, social relatedness, learning and change are more often discussed in terms of ‘social capital’ (see reviews by Prager 2015 and Tregear and Cooper 2016). Here, these elements have been unpicked in terms of co-operative practices, know-how, and affective experience. This reflects an expanded theoretical basis, augmenting the insights of Bourdieu (1984; 1990) on competency and judgement, with more recent work on the materiality and composition of social practice (see Shove et al. 2012), alongside feminist insights on the governance and performativity of the self (Gibson-Graham 2006).

This responds to prompts in the literature around the importance of farmers’ identity and the processes of composition and negotiation involved (Stock and Forney 2014; Emery 2015). It also reflects limitations in the language of social capital, as associated with processes of attainment designed to achieve power and resource. Whilst contingency is made clear in existing accounts – involving a need for *ongoing* processes of exchange (e.g. Svendsen and Svendsen 2000) – the role of emotions and more emergent affects within these processes of reciprocity is not well explored. Here we are reminded of Sennett’s (2012, p73) words of caution against imagining a ledger to record and consider every exchange, as we “often think in ways too complicated to be rendered neatly as losses and gains”.

Equally, the (re)positioning of the self and the status of one’s identity is not fully captured without attending to the routines and spaces that enable processes of recomposition and

stabilisation. This is not just about understanding the internal reflexive processes at work, but wider material expressions and connections beyond the self, including instituting social practices and the physical parameters through which co-operation can be experienced (see also Stock and Forney 2014). By attending to these vital elements, the paper sets out a more encompassing framework to address the complexities and potential of co-operation.

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