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How can organic farmers be good farmers? A study of categorisation in organic farmers' talk

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Abstract

Conversion from conventional to organic farming is considered to indicate changes in farmers' professional identities—more specifically, in their perceptions of the idea of a 'good farmer'. In this study, we focus on this theme by analysing how 'good farmer' ideals appear when farmers who have converted to organic agriculture make sense of the differences between conventional and organic farming. Through the discursive analysis of interviews with organic farmers, we show how they categorise farmers, producing and using an evaluative division in which both organic and conventional farmers fall into two subcategories, namely, 'practical organic farmer', 'idealistic organic farmer', 'conservative conventional farmer' and 'rational conventional farmer'. We argue that this categorisation, as a way to define a 'good farmer', enables organic farmers to create a coherent identity as 'good farmers' in regard to both their former conventional self and current organic self. Our study further contributes to the theoretical discussion on 'good farmer' by highlighting that, in addition to productivist symbols and economic viability, organic farmers also view a practical and open-minded attitude to managing the farm as a criterion of a 'good farmer', thus critically

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distancing themselves from conservative and ideological ideals.

KEYWORDS

discursive categorisation, good farmer, micro-constructionism, organic farmer

INTRODUCTION

Ethical, environmental and economic concerns related to industrialised agriculture have resulted in agricultural policies that emphasise multifunctional and sustainable farming practices. At the European level, policy changes are particularly reflected in and established through the Common Agricultural Policy, which encourages farmers to engage in environmentally and socially sustainable agriculture (Ward et al., 2008). In addition to responding to increasing demands for global food production, contemporary farmers are expected to provide a variety of ecosystem services, such as maintaining soil and water quality and enhancing biodiversity (e.g., Dominati et al., 2019; Schulte et al., 2014). One notable change in agriculture, reflecting these divergent expectations towards food production, is the interest in organic farming methods (Mondelaers et al., 2009). Accordingly, over 7% of total European agricultural land is currently farmed organically (Eurostat, 2018).

The transition to organic farming involves macro-level changes in the social organisation of farming, which are reflected in micro-level representations (Michelsen, 2001). It has been suggested that, from the farmers' perspective, engagement in organic agriculture indicates changes in their professional identities—more specifically, in their perceptions and interpretations of the idea of a 'good farmer' (Burton et al., 2021; Saunders, 2016; Sutherland, 2013; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012). The literature on 'good farmer' claims that membership in and social prestige in the farming community are developed, maintained and assessed through farmers' ability to exhibit and display commitment to commonly agreed productivist symbols of good farming, such as high yield, weed-free fields and well-managed livestock (Burton, 2004). Accordingly, Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) argue that conversion to organic farming may gradually influence organic farmers' acceptance of previously valued (conventional) farming symbols. For example, organic farmers may give different weight to the environment as an element of good farming, compared to their conventional counterparts (Sutherland, 2013). Thus, even though conventional farmers may also highlight care for the environment as an important value in farming, they often tend to do this in order to ensure that their land is kept in a productive and tended state rather than as an end goal of farming itself (Saunders, 2016).

Previous studies on 'good organic farmer' have demonstrated that the field of agriculture is far from static; rather, contemporary changes such as institutional and consumer-based demands for more ecologically sustainable agriculture are leading to "disjointed norms" around what it means to be a "good farmer" (Saunders, 2016, p. 395). However, even though the symbols of good farming can change along with the evolution of the field, historical analysis has demonstrated that their transformation is neither straightforward nor fast (Burton et al., 2021). Therefore, it has been suggested that the conversion from conventional to organic farming does not lead farmers simply to reject and replace previously held symbols of good farming; instead, it is more likely that

conversion leads farmers to critically reflect on those symbols (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012). While previous research has thus acknowledged the importance of understanding farmers as reflective actors, there is still a need to further explore how converting farmers may use and negotiate good farming symbols to produce coherent identity narratives.

In this article, we analyse good farming ideals as they appear when organic farmers make sense of the differences between conventional and organic farming. We argue that organic farmers are well able to reconcile conventional symbols with organic farming in order to maintain a coherent farmer identity. Utilising a micro-constructionist approach (Burr, 2015; Edwards, 1991; Nikander, 2000), we provide insights into the conversion from conventional to organic farming and its interconnection with a 'good farmer' identity by demonstrating how organic farmers produce evaluative categories of a farmer and how they position themselves in regard to those categories.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND—DISCUSSION ON A 'GOOD FARMER'

The sociological and social psychological discussion on 'good farmer' suggests that social norms and identities guide farmers' behaviour and farming strategies. More specifically, in the literature, the discussion of 'good farmer' focuses on how farmers can gain prestige and status in a farming community through the production of commonly identified and shared farming symbols. The conceptualisation of a 'good farmer' is often traced back to Burton (2004), who based his ideas on Stryker's (1968, 1994) interpretations of Mead's (1934/1967) symbolic interactionism and society's influence on self and identity. Symbolic interaction enables individuals to develop an understanding of the significance of behaviour to different groups in society and thus maintain social identity by internalising and displaying commitment to the symbolic meanings shared within a particular group, like farmers (Burton, 2004). The theorisation of the concept of a 'good farmer' is further reinforced with Bourdieu's ideas of capital, habitus and field. Accordingly, Burton et al. (2008) propose that, for farmers, cultural capital constructed and manifested through visual representations of farming skills impacts farmers' habitus—a predisposition guiding a person's behaviour in the field of agriculture.

The idea of a 'good farmer' has often been discussed in the context of productivist farming, which highlights 'a commitment to an intensive, industrially driven and expansionist agriculture with state support based primarily on output and increased productivity' (Lowe et al., 1993, p. 221). In line with productivism, the idea of a 'good farmer' has been associated with the practice of increasing production, reflected in visual symbols such as the appearance of the crop and/or the livestock and crop yield per hectare/acre (Burton, 2004; Burton & Wilson, 2006). Information on the visible symbols of good farming is transferred in the farming community through roadside or hedgerow farming, which enables farmers to display symbols of their farming ability and simultaneously provides them with an opportunity to evaluate each other as farmers (Burton, 2004). Therefore, weed-free fields, for example, have been understood as a critical visual symbol of good farming, whereas farmers who leave weeds in their fields are considered to neglect their land (Burton, 2004; Saunders, 2016). There is also a strong link between the cultural and economic capital, as the typical symbols of good farming have traditionally implied economic wealth (Sutherland, 2013; Sutherland & Burton, 2011; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012).

When focusing on the introduction of voluntary agro-ecological schemes aimed at diversifying farmers' traditional roles, Burton (2004) suggests that farmers' potential reluctance to engage in such schemes can be explained by their fear of losing the 'good farmer' identity associated with traditional, productivist agriculture (see also Burton & Paragahawewa, 2011). Any change

in traditional practices, such as conversion from conventional to more environmentally sustainable organic farming practices, may therefore be challenging for farmers, as they are unable to (re)produce the culturally valued, traditional symbols of good farming (Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012). Some researchers have argued, for example, that instead of highlighting the aim of increasing production, organic farmers perceive moral and reflexive concern for the environment and consumer wellbeing as essential elements of good farming, embodied especially in small-scale family farming (Stock, 2007).

Stock (2007) suggests that the category of organic farming is constructed as a negation of conventional, productivist-oriented farming, thus (re)producing a symbolic distinction between the two farming practices in relation to good farming ideals. Nevertheless, the threat exists of organic farming becoming ever more conventionalised, thus coming to resemble in 'structure and ideology the mainstream food sector it was established in opposition to' (Lockie & Halpin, 2005, p. 285). The conventionalisation thesis often includes the idea of the bifurcation of organic agriculture. In other words, while conventionalisation will increase as the share of large, specialised farms engaged in organic farming grows, organic agriculture itself will become divided into smaller, lifestyle-oriented and larger, industrial-oriented producers (Constance et al., 2013).

While the empirical findings on both conventionalisation and bifurcation remain ambiguous, the discussion demonstrates that neither the category of a conventional farmer nor that of an organic farmer is definitive; rather, there is overlap between them (Sutherland, 2013). Thus, instead of highlighting the bifurcation of and potential inherent tension in the ideals of good farming between productivist farming and more environmentally sustainable farming practices (like organic farming), Saunders (2016) argues that the relationship between these farming practices should be understood as increasingly fragmented (see also Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012).

In this article, we suggest that farmer categories be used for various purposes in interaction. We understand the symbols of good farming as discursive resources that farmers can strategically and reflectively use to construct the categories of conventional and organic farmers and position themselves in these categories as 'good farmers'. We use a micro-constructionist approach for categorisation. This is a novel approach in the 'good farmer' literature, although it is in line with the rhetorical approach mentioned by Burton et al. (2021; see Emery, 2010). Moreover, rather than fixed cognitive structures, we understand the categories of a conventional and organic farmer as cultural resources that can be invoked and (re)produced in different forms, with different emphases, through language use. According to this approach, farmers' talk does not merely mirror internal or external realities; instead, it is viewed as an action through which they construct farmer categories and consequently negotiate their farmer identities (Edwards, 1991; Jokinen et al., 2012; Nikander, 2000; Widdicombe, 2011; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). Furthermore, instead of presuming that visible symbols of production, such as high yield or tidy fields, are the only relevant discursive resources, we explore the variety of resources used by the interviewees themselves. Therefore, a micro-constructionist approach enables us to identify the full range of meanings and inferences that inform organic farmers' self-categorisation (Widdicombe, 2011).

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Our study's empirical data are based on 13 face-to-face interviews with a total of 16 organic farmers in Finland. Today, organic farming in Finland is strictly regulated and controlled through EU legislation, which applies to all member states. Accordingly, all farms whose products are marketed as 'organic' must be part of an organic monitoring and control system. In practice, after

a farmer has indicated their willingness to begin organic farming, an initial examination is performed during which the cultivation history and the viability of the organic cultivation plan are evaluated and a transition period is set (usually 2–3 years). Before becoming officially approved as an organic producer, a farmer must also participate in and complete an organic farming course, which provides basic information on organic agriculture, such as farming techniques, the transition period, cultivation plans, monitoring principles and organic animal husbandry. Those farms found suitable for organic agriculture are then registered in a national organic register and will be inspected at least once a year. In order to make their farming as transparent as possible, organic farmers must keep a strict record of all farming activities (Luomuwiki, n.d.). Moreover, farmers are sanctioned for failing to follow the organic farming regulation.

In our study, farmers were contacted through organic farming associations. Purposeful selection (Patton, 2002) of the farmers we interviewed was based on the following criteria. First, all the interviewees should have farmed conventionally before their conversion to organic agriculture. The conventional farming history of the interviewees varied from 2 years to two decades. Second, all the interviewees should have made the conversion to organic farming during the last 2 or 3 years. This was to ensure that although they already had some history of organic farming, they would still be able to recall with relative ease their insights into the conversion process and careers as conventional farmers.

The majority of Finnish farms (86%) are family farms (Luke, 2020), which have usually passed from one generation to the next. This was also reflected in our data, as nine of the farms in our study had been inherited from the farmer's parents and two from their grandparents. In contrast, one farmer had purchased his farm from a non-family member, and one had begun farming from scratch. The most common line of production in Finnish farms is arable farming, while one-third of farms have livestock. However, our interview data showed more variation, as just one farm focused solely on arable farming and all others also had livestock. Their livestock farming system was based on either suckler, beef or dairy cows, sheep, pigs or chickens. Even though all the fields were cultivated organically on each farm, four of the farms had not included livestock as part of their organic agriculture (a dairy farm, a pig farm, a sheep farm and a beef cattle farm).

The average size of Finnish farms is 49 hectares, which means that five of the farms in our study were above the national average. The largest farm in the data were 230 hectares (sucklers), while the three smallest farms were each 20 hectares (two sheep farms and an arable farm). The majority of interviewees were full-time farmers, although their spouses often worked outside the farm. However, the data also included three part-time farmers (a suckler cow farm, an arable farm and a pig farm). The size of all these farms was below the national average. Moreover, some farms had also diversified their business as one contained a farm shop, one was engaged in small-scale industrial activity and one was involved in breeding racehorses. Furthermore, two of the farms operated as subcontractors for a larger organic farm nearby (see Appendix Table A1).

The semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted between May 2014 and April 2015. The interviews were conducted individually with six male farmers and four female farmers. Three of the interviews were conducted with a farmer couple. The interviewer's questions prompted themes such as farming history, motivations for conversion, experiences from the conversion process and future expectations. Previous studies have often directly asked interviewees about their conception of 'good farmer' and interpreted their answers as indicators of internalised norms and habitus or the symbolic value and cultural capital attached to practical and utilitarian farming behaviour, skills and tasks (Burton et al., 2021; Burton, 2004; Sutherland, 2021). Our method is different, as in our data, the interviewees discussed a variety of themes associated with farming before, during and after their conversion to organic farming. Instead of relying on responses to

explicit requests to define ‘good farmer’, we analysed how and in what form the interviewees invoked and used farmer categories in their talk. Thus, we use a ‘good farmer’ as an analytical concept (see Burton et al., 2021) referring to the evaluation involved in the particular constellation of farmer categories we identified.

We utilise micro social-constructionist (Burr, 2015) discursive psychology, in which categories are viewed as discursive phenomena produced and used in talks rather than as fixed mental structures (Edwards, 1991). Discursive categorisation analysis draws on the ethnomethodological notion of membership categorisation, focusing on the classifications of social actors constructed in talk and conversation. In talk, categories are invoked by attaching and attributing, among others, typical activities, characteristics and predicates, and rights and obligations to the people described and treated as members of a category. Speakers may use this categorisation for achieving social ends in the ongoing interaction, for example, to enhance an argument or construct an identity for themselves or other actors (Edwards, 1991; Jokinen et al., 2012; Nikander, 2000; Wiggins & Potter, 2008).

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We began the analysis by carefully reading the transcript—scrutinising all the words, expressions and details of accounts, comments and descriptions that the interviewees used when discussing farmers, either themselves or other farmers, individually or collectively. We included both talks in which the interviewees answered questions posed by the interviewer as well as all talk about themes raised by the interviewees in the course of the interview discussion. We paid special attention to differences in the way the interviewees categorised themselves and other farmers (how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis others in the identified categories). Moreover, we strove to identify footings (Goffman, 1981) in their talk; that is, we took account not only of those incidents where they spoke for themselves, but also when they discussed what others had said, citing or referencing, for example, other farmers, the media or teachers at agricultural colleges. Next, we identified prominent, repeated attributes and predicates that the interviewees used for characterising and describing farmers, thereby invoking farmer categories. After comparing categorisations across interviews and the various themes discussed within each interview, we identified four subcategories of farmers present in the data. We named these subcategories based on their core constituent attributes.

In discursive psychology, the analysis is typically reported by focusing on specific key sequences or episodes in order to demonstrate how speakers perform discursive constructions and to highlight the grounding of analytical interpretations in the data. In our analysis, however, we found that categorisations occurred throughout the data (Jokinen et al., 2012) instead of being identifiable only in certain turns of talk or episodes of conversation. Therefore, we performed a cross-sectional analysis (Mason, 2017), checking for categorisations across the interviews and across turns and episodes within each interview. Consequently, we report our results by not only showing excerpts and analysing details of the talk, but also by commenting more generally on how and in which parts of the data we identified the construction and use of the four subcategories.

RESULTS

We identified two distinct subcategories of conventional farmer constructed in the interviewees’ talk: ‘conservative conventional farmers’ who are prejudiced against organic farming and ‘rational conventional farmers’ who are open-minded about organic farming. Similar to conventional farmers, we identified two prominent subcategories of organic farmer: the ‘idealistic, unprofessional

organic farmer’ and the ‘practical and competent organic farmer’. In the following, we depict the construction of all four subcategories in detail.

Subcategory of the prejudiced and conservative conventional farmer

One of the most obvious indicators of being a conventional rather than organic farmer is the use of synthetic chemicals in production. Our interviewees frequently discussed the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. According to their accounts, many conventional farmers use synthetic chemicals because they had learned that this was the proper way to farm, and this attitude had become habitual.

FF: For many it is exactly that: Because it has always been done this way, we will do so from now on as well, that one cannot give up and try something new; but decade after decade, it must be done the way it has always been done. (Int.6)¹

In addition to the older generation on the interviewees’ own farm, this habit was also attributed to local farmers, the farming tradition and a climate where conservative attitudes prevail. The power of tradition and habit was also stressed, for example, by portraying conventional farmers as ‘those who say that they should do something but are not able to make the change for themselves’ (MF, Int.7). Sometimes, the interviewees discussed sticking to old habits as a generic orientation to farming practice among many conventional farmers, but, most frequently, it was associated with suspicion of organic farming and a refusal to abandon the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Thus, the attitudes of the surrounding farming community were often depicted as negative towards organic farming. Many of the interviewees discussed local farmers who were suspicious and critical and even mocked and ridiculed organic farmers. While most formulated such accounts cautiously, simply stating that there had been critical or derogatory comments, some others used much stronger expressions, for example, ‘I think that, in this village, and close area, farmers widely share the opinion that organic is for idiots, against all reason, no sense whatsoever’ (MF, Int.1).

Whether such characterisations are correct or justified is not crucial to our analysis. Of concern, instead, is the way the interviewees construct a certain kind of subcategory for conventional farmers with attributes such as conservative and prejudiced against organic farming. Furthermore, we do not suggest that all conventional farmers were classified as ‘negative’ or ‘prejudiced’. Indeed, several interviewees argued that some conventional farmers were positive towards organic farming, while others were negative. In the next section, we present the second subcategory they used. A positive attitude towards organic farming is arguably one of the central attributes of that subcategory. Before that, however, we further unpack how the organic farmers we interviewed constructed and used the subcategory of the ‘conservative and prejudiced conventional farmer’.

Some of the interviewees suggested that many conventional farmers lacked proper knowledge of organic farming and were uninterested in even receiving more information. One interviewee associated such a lack of understanding with prejudice: ‘a person who hasn’t seen, and, well, doesn’t really know, and hasn’t found out about things, he easily sees this organic [farming] as a bugbear, something against reason’ (MF, Int.1). In the following excerpt, the interviewee explains that the habit of using chemical fertilisers and pesticides might steer conventional farmers towards thinking that converting to organic farming simply means abandoning their use, which would be a misleading or overly narrow understanding:

FF: Well of course it demands a bit different thinking, and if you are accustomed to thinking that you farm with [chemical] fertilisers, it takes a different kind of thinking.

I: Would you describe what kind?

FF: Oh, well, that you must in a way be able to see further, how rotation works, and be able to figure out where the fertiliser can come from, and if you simply farm without any fertilising, and without any of these collector-plants, you won't get much out of it. (Int.10)

The interviewee thus argues that in addition to abandoning the use of chemical fertilisers, organic farmers apply other methods to ensure an adequate yield. Lack of this knowledge and reliance on the assumption that the use of synthetic chemicals is a necessary element of good farming might thereby lure conventional farmers into the mistaken conclusion that organic farming is ineffective. Indeed, some of the interviewees mentioned occasions where a conventional farmer had presented doubts regarding the profitability of farming without chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and others criticised conventional farmers for not seeing and appreciating the economic opportunities in organic farming.

Furthermore, a topic repeatedly raised by the interviewees was the way conventional farmers observed and critically assessed organic farmers' fields. These assessments targeted the visible signs of yield and weeds, readily observable to a passer-by. In conventional farming, both of these factors are intimately connected with chemicals: Synthetic fertilisers are used to boost yield, and pesticides are used to prevent weeds. Episodes recalled by several interviewees involved conventional farmers who made overly simple and misplaced assessments. One interviewee, for example, claimed that groundless generalisations were often involved in such judgements:

MF: Mostly criticism is based on looking at one particular field somewhere, which has not been very successful some year, but an outsider is not able to see the whole situation, what comes out from the fields in all, on a yearly basis. You see weeds in some corner, and that area might actually be half a percentage of our whole farm and that

I: So that is then used to label the whole....

MF: Yes, it gives a negative label, and it's really so that from a single plot you make a generalisation that it won't work at all. (Int.2)

Another interviewee (MF, Int.1) further recalls an episode in which a conventional farmer from the village arrived with a bailing machine. This farmer noted the excellent condition of the organic farmer's fields and, because he was unaware he had converted to organic farming, commended him on the successful use of chemicals. Thus, the conventional farmer in the story made misplaced, conservative assessments based on the habitual assumption that the use of synthetic

chemicals determines the condition of a field. Nevertheless, the very fact that the interviewee told this story also illustrates how the subcategory of the conservative and prejudiced conventional farmer may be constructed by attributing to conventional farmers the tendency to form misplaced judgements about organic fields.

Subcategory of open-minded and rational conventional farmer

Like all conventional farmers, open-minded and rational conventional farmers may also use synthetic chemicals. All the interviewees said they had used artificial fertilisers or plant protectants, or both, when farming conventionally. They did not, however, place their former self within the subcategory of the conservative and prejudiced conventional farmer. Instead, they differentiated themselves from this subcategory by stressing that their use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides had been 'less than average', 'slight' or 'minimal' and that they had not used chemicals 'extensively' or 'excessively'. They further emphasised that while farming conventionally, they had already adopted practices typical for organic farming regarding, for example, animal welfare, crop rotation or use of nitrogen-fixing plants. Consequently, they argued that their conversion to organic farming was not a dramatic step. The interviewees also referred to other conventional farmers they knew who farmed as if they were organic. One interviewee, for example, described his conventional farmer colleague in the following way: 'well actually, in a way, he farms almost organically; he just doesn't apply for subsidies and avoids [additional] controls [laughs]' (MF, Int.2).

Some conventional farmers who were known to be interested in organic farming were also dissociated from the subcategory of the conservative and prejudiced conventional farmer. The interviewees acknowledged that many conventional local farmers had become more accepting of and encouraging towards organic farming and farmers in recent years. For instance, one interviewee told about a long dry season when neighbouring farmers had experienced difficulties because chemical fertilisers were not absorbed by their fields, but clover grew very well in his own fields, despite the dryness: 'then many of them concluded that it [organic farming] may not be that crazy a thing after all' (MF, Int.5). The interviewees also attributed a positive and open-minded attitude to those conventional fellow farmers who had provided them with peer support. Some also mentioned a spouse or member of the older farming generation who had been supportive and open towards conversion and viewed it as a positive opportunity. For instance, one interviewee recalled the time he had participated in an organic farming course where he found fellow conventional farmers with whom to discuss and deliberate the advantages and disadvantages of a possible conversion to organic agriculture:

MF: And then there was a course, a course during which I talked with, I met like-minded folk, and I remember that there were many of them who really deliberated whether to convert or not, whether to do it next summer or the following one, or when to do it, and there were those who were just window-shopping. (Int.4)

The interviewees described their previous conventional farming selves with attributes like a 'willingness to face new challenges', 'an itch to try something new', 'not being trapped into formulas' or the aspiration to 'renew farm practices'. Such generic open-mindedness was closely associated with acquiring information about organic farming. One interviewee described how he had been searching for information about clover in the 1990s and had found himself reading about

organic farming: ‘it was all about organic, and I read, studied them, and then I started to think, “why not? Why couldn’t organic farming work as well?”’ (MF, Int.2). Thus, the open-minded conventional farmer was constructed as being receptive to organic farming.

Open-minded conventional farmers, however, do not convert to organic agriculture simply because they have an unprejudiced and generic positive attitude towards organic farming. According to the interviewees’ accounts, they deliberated the advantages and disadvantages of conversion at length, sometimes over a year or even more. In each interview, the interviewer asked separately about the motives and reasons behind the farmer’s conversion decision. The answers commonly stressed economic motives or arguments. In addition to the overall profitability of the potential move into organic farming, the interviewees highlighted three specific aspects. First, they noted the high prices of chemical fertilisers and the possibility of a considerable reduction in expenses through abandoning their use. Second, they reported having pondered the possibility of raising their income by charging higher prices for products under the organic label. Third, many of the interviewees mentioned subsidies as an important criterion for conversion. An excerpt from Interview 12 illustrates this.

I: So, what made you start organic, were you not satisfied with conventional, or what...?

FF: I wasn’t dissatisfied, but, to put it frankly [laughs], it was organic subsidies. So, in a way, money. If you want to say it uglily. That was the reason.

I: Ok, that’s simple.

FF: Quite simple. There was no more romance [than that] in it [laughs]. (Int.12)

Here, the prominence of economic arguments is the primary justification for our use of ‘rational’ in the title of this subcategory. Nevertheless, the subcategory was not constructed solely on the basis of economic arguments. Several interviewees mentioned environmental or health motives in addition to economic reasons. For instance, one interviewee stated that while economic arguments were central, the extensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides ‘did not really fit my sense of reason’ (MF, Int.9). Another interviewee (MF, Int.13) reported that ecological perspectives had played ‘some role’, as he had noticed that more birds gather in organic fields than in conventional ones, and he himself had suffered from breathing and skin problems due to handling chemical pesticides. In all, many interviewees portrayed ecological arguments as relevant but not crucial in their decision. As another interviewee (MF, Int.7) put it, ecological impacts come ‘as a side effect’.

A further aspect of the attribute ‘rational’ is provided by interviewees’ answers to a question posed in each interview about risks they had perceived or worries they had experienced in regard to converting to organic farming. Potential problems with yield and weeds were emphasised. Many had been aware of the likelihood of more variation in yield, which caused uncertainty. Weed monitoring is one of the attributes of conservative and prejudiced conventional farmers, as discussed in the previous section. Likewise, open-minded and rational conventional farmers were also

constructed as being extremely sensitive to the issue of weeds. The following excerpt illustrates this well:

I: Yes. So, there was a certain threshold for making the decision, so what risks did you think were involved?

MF: Well, there are, in this crop farming, these weeds and such, you worry about how you can cope with them... what if... it doesn't work, that weeds take over the fields... but we thought [with a fellow farmer] that let's try our hardest, use all measures in order to farm so that it will be the main plants that grow there and not others. (Int.3)

Thus, while conservative and prejudiced conventional farmers use weed monitoring to belittle organic farmers, open-minded and rational farmers see weeds as a challenge that organic farmers can overcome.

Subcategory of the idealistic, unprofessional organic farmer

The subcategory of the 'idealistic and unprofessional organic farmer' was already present in the negative stereotypical conceptions about organic farmers that the interviewees attributed to conservative and prejudiced conventional farmers as discussed previously. Additionally, they talked about stereotypical images in media representations, where organic farmers were depicted as 'ideology freaks', 'who do not take proper care of their fields'. Furthermore, an interviewee portrayed the atmosphere in an agricultural school as follows:

MF: Well, it [organic farming] was regarded, and still is... as scribbling, or they think that you should wear a ponytail and sweater and have two sheep, a couple of cows, a few hens, a three-hectare field, and a small red tilted cowshed in which all they live; this is roughly their idea. (Int.13)

More often, however, the interviewees used the subcategory of the 'idealistic and unprofessional organic farmer' when discussing other organic farmers and, notably, when they made statements about the kind of organic farmer they themselves were not.

The key attributes and characteristics in the construction of this subcategory pertained to ideology, on the one hand, and to a lack of skills, on the other. Several interviewees argued that there were ideologically orientated and motivated organic farmers, who were 'root and branch organic people' (FF, Int.8), with a 'great green mindset' (MF, Int.9). Typically, they denied being such farmers themselves: 'But not any of that kind of ideological fanaticism, no' (MF, Int.2). For example, one interviewee (MF, Int.1) used a religious metaphor, stating that he was not 'a preacher' or 'prophet' who wished to persuade others to convert to organic. In contrast, one interviewee did characterise herself using the word 'ideology', but in this case, the tone was careful, and ideology was associated simply with giving up synthetic chemicals:

FF: Maybe kind of a trace of ideology has always resided in me, so that we were both very happy that we didn't need to use chemical pesticides anymore. (Int.11)

In the interviewees' accounts, ideology was contrasted, in particular, with common sense and economic thinking. For instance, one interviewee (MF, Int.9) argued that his own common sense told him that closed rotation causes less of 'these footprints and other things' without him sharing 'any great green mindset'. In an interview conducted with a farmer couple, the husband was discussing the high price of chemical fertilisers when his wife interrupted to state jokingly that her husband represented the economic orientation in their farm, while she herself paid attention to 'these ecological, and all these kind of nonsense matters [laughs]' (FF, Int.6).

Here, we see two interesting patterns. First, while the interviewees differentiate themselves from a strong or 'fanatical' ideological (organic, green, ecological) stance, they do not denigrate or negate the practice of organic farming or deny being organic farmers. The pattern is analogous to the one discussed by Widdicombe (2011) in another context: 'I'm a religious person but not a fundamentalist'. Thus, when some of the interviewees used ideology-related terms or phrases to depict themselves, they did so jokingly or with expressions like 'a little' or 'a trace of'. Second, when the interviewees contrasted a strong or fanatical ideology with common sense and economic thinking, the meaning of 'ideological', as an attribute of a subcategory of organic farmers, began to sound more like 'idealistic'. This is well illustrated in the following excerpt:

MF: Well there is of course this bunch of lifestyle freaks, who are very ideological, and they don't engage in any economic thinking... so of course, you can pat that one cow, and be good mates, but, well, that is not reality in any way. (Int.2)

Thus, the interviewees constructed a subcategory of organic farmers who were 'somehow idealistic' (MF, Int.9) and who failed to take seriously the practical and economic realities of farming as a livelihood. Characteristics such as hobbyist, tinkerer or unprofessional were repeated in the interviews. A separate question was posed in each interview regarding differences among organic farmers. Most often, the answers referred to differences in the effort invested in farming. For instance, according to one interviewee, 'there are two sorts [of organic farmers]; there are those who seriously try their best, and then those who try less seriously' (MF, Int.9). In addition to a lack of determination in running the farm profitably, a repeatedly mentioned characteristic of idealistic, unprofessional organic farmers was the poor appearance of their fields. The following extract provides one such example:

I: So, do you think all organic farmers have similar modes of action and principles?

FF: Well no. Indeed, there are those who have only nonsense hay growing in their fields [laughs]; they only claim subsidies....

I: So that they are not fully involved?

FF: No, in a way, they take the easy way out. (Int.12)

Some final remarks on the use of this subcategory are necessary. Namely, some of the interviewees attributed the terms 'hobbyist' and 'unprofessional' to small-scale farming. Unsurprisingly,

these comments were from interviewees with larger farms. Interestingly, however, those interviewees who ran smaller farms themselves refused to categorise themselves as hobbyists or unprofessional. For instance, one interviewee (MF, Int.7) specifically denied this, stating that ‘this isn’t any tinkering hobby’ and stressing that, despite the small scale, the aim was to earn a living wage from farming.

Subcategory of the practical and competent organic farmer

We named the second subcategory of organic farmers the ‘practical and competent organic farmer’, with the intention of stressing that the talk through which the subcategory is constructed is richly flavoured with personal accounts of grass-roots organic farming practice and expertise. The interviewees used this subcategory mainly when depicting and commenting on their own activities and experiences after their conversion to organic agriculture. Unsurprisingly, they placed themselves in this subcategory.

The interviewees constructed practical and competent organic farmers in contrast to their idealistic, unprofessional counterparts. Both subcategories, however, shared the attribute of not using chemical fertilisers or plant protectants in production. However, the subcategory of the ‘open-minded and rational conventional farmer’, in which the interviewees placed their former conventional self, and the category of the ‘practical and competent organic farmer’ are not in direct contrast, although there are clear differences. The most evident is that the latter has totally abandoned the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and has acquired experience and expertise in organic farming methods.

Although shunning the ideological labelling of their work, practical organic farmers acknowledge that the use of synthetic chemicals in production may be detrimental to the environment and hazardous to health. Moreover, practical organic farmers fluently use ecological viewpoints to support their arguments. They understand that the credibility of the organic brand necessitates official regulations and supervision. Nevertheless, they are able to reflect critically on these principles from the perspective of the everyday practicalities and limitations of their work. A striking example was the argument advanced by three interviewees that, in organic farming, fuel consumption actually increases because of attempts to compensate for chemical weed control by more frequent sowing and ploughing. One of them (MF, Int.2) even argued that ‘from a holistic ecological view it would be smarter to use a little Roundup [laughs] so that you wouldn’t need to use all that fuel and do so much tractor work’, but he hastened to add that this was just one possible angle on the matter, and he would nonetheless obey the rules and regulations.

Even though practical organic farmers understand that the credibility of the organic brand necessitates official regulations and control, they may criticise their implementation in various ways. For instance, a common remark was that the authorities often announced inspections at too short a notice, disturbing everyday routines. Moreover, inspectors were seen to make pedantic and irrelevant comments and were viewed as being more interested in paperwork than in the condition of fields and animals. Furthermore, advice and interpretations of the rules by different authorities were considered to be inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. Typical of this criticism was the interviewees’ juxtaposition of the perspective of the authorities with a common-sense perspective anchored in the everyday work of organic farmers. Indeed, when asked about the possible risks anticipated before converting to organic farming, one interviewee (MF, Int.2) mentioned that he had not expected that the interpretation and implementation of the regulations would be so unpredictable.

A practical orientation was also constructed in comments about possible conversion back to conventional farming, a theme that was raised by the interviewer in each interview. Some interviewees stated that this option was unrealistic or extremely unlikely in their own case, as it would be economically disadvantageous. For example, while one interviewee pondered whether conversion back to conventional farming would enable him to enlarge his herd because there would be more feed grain available, he nevertheless concluded that 'then again, if you pick up a calculator, it wouldn't necessarily be any better for your wallet even if you had 400 cows' (MF, Int.9). In contrast, some other interviewees remarked that converting back to conventional farming would be a feasible option if organic farming were to become too difficult in terms of profitability, regulations or the manageability of fields and production. Similarly, several interviewees recalled hearing stories about organic farmers who had converted back to conventional farming, and some claimed that they knew at least one such case. In one instance, the reason was stated to have been economic; in all others, the reason mentioned was that these farmers had been unable to keep their fields tidy. Some interviewees shared such a notion:

I: So are your thoughts different now than then, 3 years ago?

MF: Well, I don't know. Not much, anyway. I totally approve if somebody wants to farm conventionally, and even I could convert back myself, I must say [laughs], if I don't succeed; namely, you must succeed in keeping the fields in good condition.

I: Yes,

MF: So if I don't succeed, I will convert back. (Int.3)

Here, it is worth noting that the interviewee stresses that he fully approves of farmers who farm conventionally. Thus, the issue is not so much one of principle but rather of practical concern about success in farming. Furthermore, of these practical considerations, the tidiness of fields appears to be a crucial concern.

One interviewee recalled that a teacher at an agricultural college had remarked 'if you are competent enough, you can succeed even in organic farming' (FF, Int.12). Most often, however, the interviewees constructed the category of competent organic farmers when discussing their own activities and experiences. Some of them explicitly stated that during their time as organic farmers, they had learnt many new things about organic methods. Most of the interviewees demonstrated their acquired expertise by, for example, detailing organic practices and the functioning of crop rotation, the utilisation of plant combinations, the blending of manure, the timing of sowing, enhancing animal welfare and securing production of calves, meat, pork and milk and ways to control weeds.

Competent organic farmers are able to achieve and maintain the profitability of their farms, although the level of economic goal setting may vary. Some of the interviewees reported having expanded their farm and production volume and stressed the aim of providing for the family and being able to amortise investment loans. Some others emphasised the aim of a satisfactory economic outcome within the limits of a small farm and provided reasons for not expanding, such as personal health problems, high age, the lack of potential successors or the part-time nature of their

farming. As a rule, nevertheless, the interviewees emphasised that, in economic terms, conversion to organic farming had been advantageous. For example, according to one interviewee:

MF: At least I feel that, for us, those organic subsidies in milk, and then field subsidies, and the saved costs of chemical fertilisers and poisons, that's what makes the annual profit for me. I have sometimes wondered what if I was still in conventional [farming], where would the money come from. Well, of course, there is not so much money that I would be swimming in it, even now, but I do make a living and I'm able to invest a little. (Int.9)

Competence was also associated with yield and animal productivity. While one farmer (MF, Int.9) claimed that 'nothing like a reduction in milk quantity has occurred, another highlighted success in yield levels:

FF: Organic grass, it starts to grow much later than conventional grass, because you can't throw chemical fertilisers on top of it. This really shows. But then again, if the year is good and the pH value of the soil is correct, and you have found such plants that flourish there, well you get a huge yield. So, the quantity of yield has not been a problem for us. (Int.12)

Finally, the construction of competent organic farmers was manifested in the frequent talk about weed control: Competent organic farmers are proud of their tidy fields. For example, one interviewee boasted, 'I must say that we have this one field we have cultivated for 3 years, and if you compare it with a nearby conventional field, they have more weeds than we do'. (MF, Int.1) Absolute tidiness, however, is not a necessity. For instance, one interviewee (MF, Int.9) remarked that organic farmers can tolerate some weeds, and those who tolerated none should remain in conventional farming. Nevertheless, methods of weed control were repeatedly raised in interviewees' accounts and appeared to be an important aspect of an organic farmer's competence. Competent organic farmers keep a keen eye on emerging weeds and act with determination as an extract from Interview 4 illustrates:

I: Yes. Would you then assess your own action and farm in all? What are ultimately the biggest changes that came along with this organic [farming]?

MF: Well, because there are no plant protectants, it causes mechanical work; during the conventional time, we would spread chemicals and that was that, but now, when I grow quite a lot of grass, I go and cut down those annual weeds; I go early in the summer, if needed, to cut them before they bloom, so they do not expand.

I: Yes.

MF: So, it is this kind of mechanical work.

I: Yes, has increased.

MF: Yeah. And, then I imagine, that my neighbour farmer might think that ‘why on earth is he driving on that field today’ [laughs]. (Int.4)

In addition to cutting weeds with machinery, several interviewees reported removing them manually. Moreover, especially when weeds were abundant, ploughing was mentioned as an efficient means of eradicating them. Indeed, one interviewee even reported the routine use of ploughing for this purpose: ‘we plough every field; no doubt about it, it is one way to keep weeds under control. There is no shortcut there’ (MF, Int.1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through a detailed discursive analysis of interviews with organic farmers, we demonstrated that the interviewees constructed and used four subcategories of farmers, producing a division in which both organic and conventional farmers fell into two subcategories. We argue that, for our interviewees, this categorisation is a way to define a ‘good farmer’. Namely, the subcategories are not value-free, neutral descriptions. Instead, they are evaluative (see Pyysiäinen, 2010). In the interview talk, the category ‘conservative and prejudiced conventional farmer’ bore a more negative tone than the ‘open-minded and rational conventional farmer’ did, and likewise, the ‘idealistic and unprofessional organic farmer’ was portrayed more negatively than the ‘practical and competent organic farmer’. Thus, the latter categories depict ‘good farmers’, whereas the former depict ‘bad farmers’. This evaluative aspect becomes even more obvious when analysing the way that the interviewees categorised their former conventional self and current organic self into the positive subcategories and differentiated themselves from the negative ones (see Tajfel et al., 1971). We thus argue that the organic farmers used this evaluative categorisation to construct a coherent identity as ‘good farmers’, concerning both their former conventional self and their current organic self (see Figure 1).

We do not view the categories uncovered by our analysis as fixed or generalizable descriptions of real-world farmer types or styles of farming (e.g., van der Ploeg, 1994). Instead, we applied the perspective of discursive categorisation and contend that conventional and organic farmers are cultural categories (Burton et al., 2021, p. 26; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012) that serve as flexible resources for language users. Thus, our results tell us how the organic farmers evoked and used these cultural categories, thereby producing their own versions of conventional and organic farmer. The micro-constructionist approach to categorisation in farmers’ talk draws attention to the discursive agency of the farmers we interviewed (see also Emery, 2010). Rather than assuming that their talk indicates underlying psychological factors, such as an internalised social norm, learned identity or habitus, the talk is analysed and interpreted as an action performed by an active agent who uses available resources to produce evaluative categories and position him/herself in relation to these.

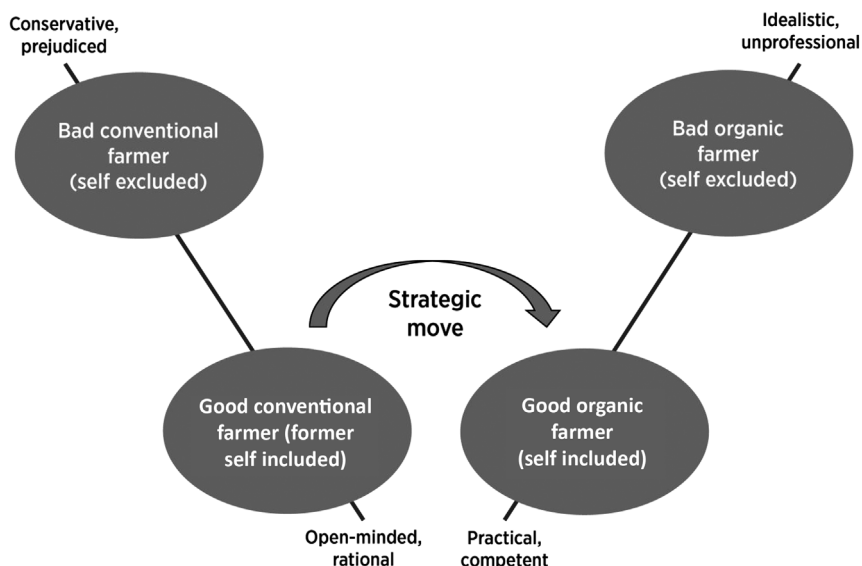


FIGURE 1 Constellation of categories uncovered in the analysis

Production skills, performance and profitability as attributes of good and 'bad farmers'

The two subcategories of 'good farmer' in our data match Sutherland and Darnhofer's (2012) observation that organic farming, irrespective of profitability, was not viewed as a criterion of a 'good farmer'. In the categorisation produced by our interviewees, a 'good conventional farmer' views organic farming as one option for the maintenance of economic viability and deliberates on its advantages and disadvantages. A 'good organic farmer' pursues overall economic profitability by taking advantage of reduced costs, better prices and subsidies. Thus, the categories overlap by sharing the 'taste of necessity' about economic viability, a point stressed by Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012; also Sutherland, 2013; Saunders, 2016).

According to Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012), changes in the economic and operational environment, or 'field', have led farmers to devalue productivist symbols of good farming: high yields and weed-free fields would lose their importance if they were no longer credibly indicating profitability (see also Riley, 2016). Our interviewees reflected on the use of these symbols, for example, by criticising their overly rigid or narrow-minded application by conventional farmers. Nevertheless, they used the symbols as attributes of a 'good farmer' in several ways. According to their categorisation, good conventional farmers are aware that in organic farming, yields may fluctuate and that weed control may prove challenging. Good organic farmers aim for high yields and tidy fields, and they develop the organic farming skills required to achieve these aims (see also Saunders, 2016). The category of bad organic farmer they constructed in part by the attribute of failing to keep the fields tidy. Thus, despite viewing profitability as multiply determined and not solely an outcome of productivity, our interviewees used the traditional productivist symbols as important criteria for a 'good farmer'.

Intriguingly, the interviewees did not construct a category of an intensive, industrial, production-maximising farmer (see Bell, 2004; Stock, 2007). The category of bad conventional farmer did not depict such a farmer, notwithstanding that the interviewees are organic farmers

who are often assumed to be at odds with industrial farmers (Stock, 2007) or differentiate themselves from the latter group. Neither did the category of good organic farmer directly match the idea of conventionalised organic farmer (Darnhofer et al., 2010; Lockie & Halpin, 2005; Stock, 2007). Presenting these conclusions is not to say that the interviewees took a stand for or against industrial and intensive farming; they simply did not base their categorisation on these criteria. Yet, regarding the category of bad organic farmer, they used the lack of professional goals in profitability and productivity as attributes of that category.

Moral dimension in attributes

According to Burton et al. (2021), much of theorising about 'good farmer' has focused on practice-based criteria, underscoring skills and performance in production. However, they contend that other, non-production-related dimensions of evaluation must not be ignored. According to them, of special relevance is the moral dimension that goes beyond performance and competence and involves 'a wider social evaluative framework' over farmers' behaviour, addressing the purpose and function of farming itself (Burton et al., 2021, p.87). As a prime example, the growing demand for measures of environmental protection and climate change prevention has questioned the moral goodness of conventional production and its outcomes. While going beyond competence and performance-based criteria of being a 'good farmer', this moral concern about the role of farmers collectively in society nevertheless represents criteria with which farmers may potentially assess each other as being a good or a 'bad farmer'. Engagement with environmental protection practices, such as conversion to organic farming, may therefore lead to conflicting evaluations between farmer groups committed to different moral imperatives (Burton et al., 2021).

Prejudiced, idealistic or open-minded attitudes as attributes of being a good or a 'bad farmer' in our data are not about production skills and performance as such. They do appear as moral criteria, as far as we view them as attitudes about environmental protection per se. A 'bad farmer' is prejudiced and rejects organic farming outright, while a 'good farmer' is open-minded and may even adopt organic practices. Intriguingly, the interviewees also used the ideological or idealistic attitude in favour of organic farming as an attribute of a 'bad farmer'. In all, the categorisation seems to suggest that strong or extreme moral stances either for or against organic serve as criteria for being described as a 'bad farmer', while a moderately positive moral stand is a sign of being a 'good farmer'. The organic farmers differentiated themselves from holders of a strong moral view and, by way of implication, avoided positioning themselves as parties in moral break-up or conflict.

Interestingly, 'practical' and 'rational', as attributes of being a 'good farmer', have a taste of morality as well, even if depicting a moderate instead of strong ideological stand in this context. Namely, these attributes could also be associated with the moral imperative of production and productivist tones of intensive industrial farming. Nonetheless, being practical and rational as attributes appear to make an understandable connection between moral and practice-based criteria, showing how these can be intertwined.

Integrating fragmented ideals

Recent research has often stated that symbols and definitions of being a 'good farmer' are changing and fragmented (Burton et al., 2021; McGuire et al., 2013; Riley, 2016; Saunders, 2016; Sutherland &

Darnhofer, 2012). The fragmentation is especially associated with the difference between the conventional and organic farming communities. Our results attest to this fragmentation in two ways. First, our study uncovered a novel ‘good farmer’ categorisation by a particular group of farmers, that is, farmers who have converted from conventional to organic farming in Finland during the last decade. It is likely that organic and conventional farmers in some other localities and contexts could define good and ‘bad farmers’ differently (e.g., Burton, 2004; Stock, 2007). Second, our study illustrates how farmers may take advantage of diversified conceptions of being a ‘good farmer’ and farming as cultural and rhetorical resources for constructing good and ‘bad farmer’ categories and identities. Our interviewees were aware of competing ideals and made a virtue of not committing to some of them. Thus, in their talk, one can identify a constellation of categories, which in itself represents a ‘good farmer’ conception of its own kind and yet is constructed by bringing together and re-evaluating alternative and competing ‘good farmer’ ideals.

However, it is important to note that ‘fragmentation’ viewed in this way does not mean disjointed (Burton et al., 2021; Saunders, 2016) and diverse elements put randomly together, that ‘anything goes’, or that the farmers we interviewed and their talk is disconnected from the rest of the farming community. On the contrary, the constellation of categories (see Figure 1) makes a coherent whole that understandably serves in identity building. In the Finnish context, a clear majority of the farming community still consists of conventional, small-scale family farms, many of which need to find new ways to survive. The organic farmers come from various locations in Finland, and most are surrounded by conventional farming communities and have been conventional farmers themselves. It should not be surprising that the categorisation they produce also includes good conventional farmers and presents the good organic farmer as a category that may be appreciated and approved of in the eyes of conventional farmers as well. Further, in the Finnish context during the last two decades, organic farming as a cultural category has undergone a change in which earlier conceptions of pioneering, ideologically driven organic farmers are dissociated from current views of the organic label as a pragmatic choice with its stigmatising features removed (Siltaoja et al., 2020). Also in this light, the categorisation by the interviewees appears all but contextually disconnected.

Constructing identity through a constellation of categories

The ‘good farmer’ categories produced by our interviewees relate to categories formulated in previous research. The category of the good organic farmer chimes with the notion of the ‘pragmatic organic farmer’, who acknowledges the need and opportunity for profitability in organic farming (Darnhofer, 2005; Sutherland, 2013; Sutherland & Darnhofer, 2012). The category of the good conventional farmer is reminiscent of studies suggesting that the emergence of organic farming has catalysed a wider ‘organification’ (Campbell & Rosin, 2011) in which some conventional farmers have adopted ‘shades of greenness’ (Fairweather et al., 2009). Such farmers may have become ‘effectively organic’, using environmentally friendly low-input strategies, although not officially certified as organic (Höglind et al., 2021; Sutherland, 2013).

Furthermore, Sutherland and Darnhofer’s (2012) portrayal of ‘good farmer’ definitions among conventional and organic farmers fits well with the two ‘good farmer’ categories produced by our organic farming interviewees. Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012, p. 235) found ‘considerable overlap between the definitions of “good farming” by conventional and organic farmers’. Correspondingly, the categories of good conventional farmer and good organic farmer in our data do not contradict each other (see also Saunders, 2016). For both categories, profitability considerations

are crucial, and organic farming represents an acceptable, potentially profitable alternative. The categories differ from each other, especially because the good organic farmer has made the strategic move to convert officially and displays the skills needed to farm profitably under the organic label.

A pronounced difference between our study and that of Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) is that our analysis uncovered the fact that separate categories of bad conventional and bad organic farmers may be constructed and used by organic farmers. Far from simple binary opposition between a good organic and a bad conventional farmer or from a direct antithesis to a skilful and a well-performing farmer, the categories of 'bad farmer' are also constructed through the difference between farmers' practical/open-minded and ideological/conservative attitudes. While the two 'good farmer' categories are compatible and close to each other (see Figure 1), making conversion appear merely as a strategic move, the categories of bad conventional and bad organic farmers are opposing and far from each other, so that the conversion into organic appears more like an ideological leap or radical religious-type conversion (see Bell, 2004, pp. 157–159).

The category of the bad conventional farmer who conservatively adheres to old farming habits and is prejudiced against alternative ways of farming obviously matches the productivist farmer theorised by Burton (2004). However, while Burton's point is that conventional farmers share the conservative ideal of being a 'good farmer', our interviewees argued against this ideal, turning it into narrow-mindedness and prejudice. Bell (2004) reports similar arguments by sustainable farmers about industrial farmers in Iowa.

The category of the bad organic farmer, who is ideologically driven and fails to respect the standards of professional farming, is familiar with the ironic stereotypes of pioneering organic farmers (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019). It also echoes studies that have portrayed organic farming as an ideological antidote to productivist farming: a totally different paradigm with completely different standards (e.g., Stock, 2007; also Beus & Dunlap, 1990). Thus, while this category may be interpreted as representing good farming ideals shared by some farming communities, our interviewees constructed it with the flavour of caricature, using it to depict 'bad farmers' as being different from themselves.

Reconsidering reflectiveness

In a seminal article, Burton (2004) used symbolic interactionism to theorise about social dynamics that bind a farmer's self with productivist ideals. These ideals function as criteria for receiving and giving recognition, and when internalised as 'the eye of other farmers', within the self, they function to define for a farmer which lines of action are rewarding or unrewarding. As stated, the organic farmers we interviewed used production- and profitability-related ideals for producing 'good farmer' categories, including being a good organic farmer. In this regard, one could argue that the productivist eye of other farmers informs their categorisation. At the same time, the interviewees also produced two distinct categories of 'bad farmer', not simply based on production- and profitability-related ideals but rather as categories of farmers having a strong (moral) view about the goodness of conventional over organic farming, and vice versa. Both categories depict 'the eye of other farmers', one cherishing productivist ideals and the other alternative, environmental ideals. But, these 'eyes of other farmers' appear not to inform the interviewees doing the categorising, as they differentiate themselves from these categories and evaluate them negatively. In other words, they 'responded over against' these 'evaluative eyes'.

A relational reading of Mead's symbolic interaction (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) interprets symbolic interaction within the self as 'dialogical reflection', an ongoing process in which the individual not only adopts the attitude of others as a constitutive aspect of their self (the 'me') but also responds 'over and against it' (the 'I'; Mead, 1934/1967). From this perspective, the categorisation analysed in this article may be viewed as a display of discursive ability to not only adopt but also to question and consider practices, attitudes and ideals shared by other farmers.

This point is not alien in previous studies of 'good farmer' ideals and organic farming. For example, Stock (2007) portrays US Midwest organic farmers as 'reflexive producers' for whom a 'good farmer' is concerned about the environment and the wellbeing of people in general. This attitude means 'responding over against' the productivist eye of conventional industrial farmers. Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) wrote about the 'reflexive assessment of good farming ideals', meaning the questioning and critical reevaluation of visible productivist symbols of being a 'good farmer' on the basis of the profitability criterion. In both cases, we have farmers responding against some productivist ideals among conventional farmers. As in our study, reflectiveness appears to be enabled or enhanced by the presence or availability of alternative practices and ideals, namely, conventional and organic. However, a noteworthy difference is that in our study, the organic farmers responded over against not only some ideals and attitudes among conventional farmers but also over and against some ideals and attitudes among organic farmers. Through this, they can pave the way for positioning themselves among the 'good farmers', whether in conventional or in organic farming.

Limitations and future research

The qualitative nature of our study involves an obvious limitation, as no statistical generalisations can be argued for. We do not claim that all organic farmers in Finland, and not even the interviewed farmers in all situations, would construct exactly the same constellation of categories and position themselves in the same way. We do claim, however, that the categorisation uncovered by our analysis is a real-world possibility, displayed with empirical data. It is thus a demonstrated possibility that is relevant for theoretical generalisations and discussions about the topic. Future research could analyse 'good farmer' ideals through categorisations constructed not only by organic farmers but also by farmers representing various localities or styles of conventional farming, as well as by farmers engaging in interactions within various communities of practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTE

¹MF = male farmer; FF = female farmer, I = interviewer; Int.1–13 = interview number.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1

| Int. number | Year of organic conversion | Production line (the production line in parenthesis is not part of organic agriculture) | Size of the farm (ha) | Full-time/part time farming |
|-------------|----------------------------|---|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | 2012 | Suckler cows, arable | n.a. | Part-time |
| 2 | 2008 | Suckler cows, arable | 230 | Full-time |
| 3 | 2001 | (Dairy cows), arable | 100 | Full-time |
| 4 | 2010 | (Beef cattle), arable | 38 | Full-time |
| 5 | 2010 | Suckler cows, arable | 45 | Full-time |
| 6 | 2012 | Sheep, chicken, arable | 20 | Full-time |
| 7 | 2008 | (Sheep), arable | 20 | Full-time |
| 8 | 2010 | Suckler cows, arable | 40 | Full-time |
| 9 | 2009 | Dairy cows, arable | 200 | Full-time |
| 10 | 2011 | Arable farm | 20 | Part-time |
| 11 | 2009 | (Pigs), arable | 30 | Part-time |
| 12 | 2011 | Suckler cows, arable | 90 | Full-time |
| 13 | 1995 | Pigs, arable | 55 | Full-time |