

# Good Farmers, Good Neighbours? The Role of Cultural Capital in Social Capital Development in a Scottish Farming Community

Lee-Ann Sutherland\* and Rob J.F. Burton

## Abstract

Recent decades have seen a gradual erosion of farming incomes across the UK due to falling commodity prices and changes to the subsidy regime. This study examines what resources farmers are able to access informally and how this 'social capital' is generated and maintained in farming communities. Using a conceptual framework based on Bourdieu's conceptualisations of social and cultural capital, this study explores the evolving informal exchange relationships between farmers in a case study of Upper Deeside, Scotland. We find that although cultural capital is important for accessing social capital, the technological treadmill characteristic of 'good farming' creates a disincentive for informally sharing machinery amongst large-scale farmers. However, social capital remains an important resource for smaller scale farmers, particularly in terms of their access to labour. We conclude by suggesting that, far from being a low-cost means of facilitating community economic development, increasing the level of social capital will be difficult in communities where labour is a scarce or expensive resource.

## Introduction

Social capital has been widely touted as a means of improving the economic effectiveness of rural communities, both in Europe; most notably through the EU LEADER programme (see Shucksmith 2000; Nardone *et al.* 2010), and globally, through extensive work by international development agencies, NGOs and the World Bank (2011) (Holt 2008). However, despite its widespread use, few studies are available that examine the creation of social capital at the actor and network level and thus there is little understanding as to how its informal development can be facilitated in rural communities themselves. As a result, Sobels *et al.* (2001) observe that many reports of social capital in agricultural communities fail to resolve the circular argument that social capital leads to further social capital.

Why is social capital so important? While there are many different perspectives on the nature of social capital, the fundamental principle is that economic and social transactions are promoted through the quality of the interactions within a community or network. For Bourdieu (1986) social capital is a form of stored capital that acts as part of a wider system of capital exchange (cultural, social and economic capital); for Putnam (1993, 2000), it reflects forces of history, again leading to a stored form of capital that promotes economic development and for Coleman (1988) social capital acts not so much as stored capital but as a facilitator of exchange that can lead to the creation of human capital in communities. In all cases (also see Fukuyama 2000; Lin 2001; Burt 2004), the key role of social capital is that it can promote development – aiding in the accumulation of either economic or human capital, and it can do so without incurring great financial cost (a bonus for increasingly neoliberal governments). However, these authors – mostly clearly Bourdieu and Coleman – acknowledge that social capital can also have negative consequences, through imposing normative restrictions on acts that would benefit the community (Coleman 1988) and reinforcing the existing social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1986).<sup>1</sup>

Studies investigating community development and social cohesion in rural areas often use social capital as a conceptual framework (for example, Shucksmith 2000; Sharp 2001; Shortall 2004, 2009; Lee *et al.* 2005). However, in most of these cases, the focus is on rural communities in general, leaving us with a relatively limited understanding of the generation of social capital within farming communities, apart from a few studies in developing (Barrow and Hicham 2000) or transitioning countries (O'Brien *et al.* 2000; Small 2002). A particularly important issue is the generation of informal social capital – that is, social capital not generated through formalised co-operation (as addressed in Svendsen and Svendsen's (2000) study of the Danish co-operative dairy movement), vertical connections to commercial suppliers (Gustafson and Nganje 2006) or information exchange (Sobels *et al.* 2001; Kilpatrick 2002; Warriner and Moul 2002). North American research has demonstrated that farmers express a preference for relying on informal social support in times of physical need (Martinez-Brawley and Blundall 1989), and will pool their labour and physical resources to withstand events that impact on them as a group, such as extreme weather events (Sutherland and Glendinning 2008). Yet there has been limited research to date on either the resources that are shared informally between farmers, such as equipment and labour or on what facilitates these exchanges.

In this study we examine the generation and maintenance of social capital in a case study of Upper Deeside, Scotland. We utilise Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital as a conceptual framework. Emphasis is placed on identifying the resources that can and cannot be accessed through social capital and the differential barriers to access – what is it that facilitates the initiation of sharing activities with respect to machinery and labour? Of particular concern is which farmers benefit most from social capital in relation to their enterprises.

### Theorising social capital at the farm level

In constructing a study of social capital, there are three key perspectives to choose from; those of Putnam (1993), Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986). The literature

on social capital in rural areas in the past has predominantly employed Putnam and Coleman's perspectives on social capital (see Small 2002; Mathijs 2003; D'Haese *et al.* 2005). For this study we chose to look at social capital using Bourdieu's framework for two key reasons. Firstly, while Putnam's (1993) emphasis on civil engagement and regional economic growth has meant that it is his vision of social capital that became popularised in governmental and policy circles (Lee *et al.* 2005; Holt 2008), his work has been criticised for its lack of theorising on the origins of social capital – displaying what some describe as circular logic (Portes 2000; Sobels *et al.* 2001) that stocks of social capital, such as trust, norms and exchange networks, tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative. Thus, rather than explaining the development of social capital, Putnam emphasises the importance of historical patterns; for example, civic traditions in Italy in his seminal work (Putnam 1993), that is, social capital simply generates more social capital with no clear conceptualisations of the processes involved in its initiation.

Secondly, although Coleman's (1988) perspective of social capital is focused on a more useful scale (household-based social capital) it has also been criticised for its conceptualisation of human action. In particular, Coleman's work aims at contributing to rational choice theory through the inclusion of social structural constraints such as access to information and social norms (Coleman 1990). This theory, which became prominent in the late 1980s, views social structures as being the aggregate products of individual, rational decisions based on individual goals and values. Rational choice theory, while welcomed by some as an interdisciplinary approach allowing the integration of economics, sociology and political science, is heavily criticised by others as a return to the use of micro-economics to explain human behaviour (Archer and Titter 2000).

While Coleman and Putnam's approaches to social capital are both widely used in the literature neither would appear to be adequate for exploring the growth of social capital at the farm level as they do not focus on the informal (that is, non-institutional) generation of capital through individual agency. In contrast, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital is widely acknowledged in the literature as being 'theoretically more compelling than the more popular versions proffered by James Coleman and Robert Putnam' (Swartz 2003, p. 523; also see Portes 1998; Shucksmith 2000; Holt 2008). Bourdieu (1986, p. 248) defines social capital as

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital.

However, unlike Putnam and Coleman, he does not set out to specifically address the question of how social capital can be reinforced through community or organisational enhancement. Rather, in an attempt to redefine capital and promote a general science of the economy of practices, Bourdieu proposed the existence of capital in three fundamental forms: as economic capital (material property), social capital (networks of social connections and mutual obligations) and cultural capital (institutionalised, objectified and embodied symbols of cultural competence that generate prestige within the peer group). For Bourdieu a cultural good (such as a painting) has both

material and symbolic value: while purchasing a painting requires only the economic capital equivalent to its material value, the purchaser must also display and discuss the painting appropriately, thus demonstrating cultural capital, in order to gain the prestige associated with ownership of the painting.<sup>2</sup> Social legitimisation gained through ownership reflects the symbolic value of the painting. Access to the painting may depend on social capital: Bourdieu argues that the volume of social capital possessed depends on the size of the network of connections of an individual, and the resources (economic and cultural) that can be mobilised through that network.

Central to Bourdieu's 'economy of practices' is the notion that capital is transferable between all three forms such that 'profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 253) and thus

the conservation of social energy through all its conversions is verified if, in each case, one takes into account both the labour-time accumulated in the form of capital and the labour-time needed to transform it from one type into another. (Bourdieu 1986, p. 253)

However, the conversion or transformation of one form of capital into another is not without loss (owing to the labour time required to achieve this transformation). Bourdieu is clear that social and cultural capital are only partially reducible to economic capital. Bourdieu also contends that social and cultural capital are more closely related to each other than to economic capital, and thus transformation occurs more easily between them (Swartz 1997).

Holt (2008) suggests there are two key reasons why we should view Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital as theoretically superior to those of Putnam and Coleman. Firstly, Bourdieu produces a convincing theory about the co-construction of capital – a means by which capital can be transferred from one form to another. In this study, where items of exchange such as machinery may have both material and symbolic value (for example, Burton 2004), a broader understanding of the function and form of social capital is critical. Secondly, Bourdieu introduces the concept of habitus:

a socialised body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action within that world. (Bourdieu 1998, p. 81)

Through habitus, actors are portrayed as active, rather than passive in response to structural conditions, but as operating within a set of socialised norms and expectations that shape their 'disposition to act' towards culturally accepted standards. Bourdieu thus provides a more nuanced understanding of the subject/agent as his work allows for subconscious and non-reflexive actions. A third reason for choosing Bourdieu's conceptualisation comes from Shucksmith (2000), who points to the emphasis of Bourdieu on the development of capitals by individuals in groups, rather than by groups as a whole. This enables us to focus our study at household level and address the way in which individual behaviour relates to capital development for both the household and the group.

Bourdieu (1986) saw the network of relationships to be the product of conscious and unconscious investment strategies. 'Contingent relations' – those of geographical proximity – had to be activated by an ongoing exchange in order to form 'durable

obligations' (ranging from subjective feelings of gratitude and respect to institutionally guaranteed rights), in order for social capital to exist. For Bourdieu, individuals are born into groups and have access to social capital as a result, but build these connections over time, making it possible to secure positions of greater capital – economic, cultural and social – by means of the connections that they reinforce.

The advantage of using Bourdieu as a framework to explore the process of social capital generation through machinery and labour exchange is that Bourdieu's entire thesis revolves around the exchange and transfer of capital types. To Bourdieu, all forms of capital (cultural, social or economic) simply represent accumulated labour and all exchange is done on a symbolic level. Consequently, the material objects of exchange (in this case machinery and labour) can be seamlessly incorporated into the framework. Further, labour and machinery exchanges with neighbouring farmers fit within Bourdieu's theory as his concept of contingent relations suggests that proximal relations (those of neighbours) are translated into durable obligations by means of repeated positive interactions. Thus Bourdieu provides a more useful approach for understanding informal exchange in farming communities than Coleman's or Putnam's institutionally based approaches.

### Methodology

The study reported here was conducted as part of an interdisciplinary project to understand and model land use change in the Grampian region of Scotland. Researchers engaged in the Complexity, Agents, Volatility, Evidence and Scale project of the EU's New and Emerging Science and Technologies research programme, which focused on understanding how to incorporate broader cultural factors into agent-based models of land-use change – in particular focusing on cultural factors that promoted the exchange of equipment, labour and ideas that affect land-use. As part of this, a qualitative investigation was undertaken in the Upper Deeside region of Scotland – an area of extensive sheep and beef cattle farming currently experiencing financial stress as a result of international market conditions and a perceived lack of viable alternatives.

Studying farms in this area had two key advantages for an investigation of social capital. Firstly, financial pressures combined with a perceived lack of alternatives meant that systems of informal cooperation were likely to provide a viable means of enhancing profitability (by reducing operating costs). Thus the situation in this region was one that potentially promoted exchange. Secondly, farming in the region has been exceptionally stable, with many farms having been in the same families for generations. As a result, the social relations between farm families and exchange practices have had many years to become established and thus, it was considered likely that a strong local culture may have developed.

The study itself consisted of semi-structured interviews with 24 farmers, six successors, and five estate managers. These were supplemented by eight interviews with key informants – non-farmers working in the region's agricultural industry (for example, an accountant, a bank manager and an agricultural advisor). Respondents were selected using a snowballing methodology to deal with the problem of incomplete sampling frames common to studies of farming communities (Burton and

Wilson 1999). To ensure that respondents were not members of a single social circle or farming type, two key informants (one from the local Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group and the other representing the local branch of the National Farmers' Union) recommended the initial respondents.

The interview guide encouraged interviewees to explore issues of social relationships (including the exchange of resources) and the social and economic response of the community to specific shock events (such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, foot and mouth disease and the Single Farm Payment). During the early interviews the farmers' reputation (that is, their cultural capital) emerged as an important topic in social and resource exchanges and was consequently addressed in more detail in later interviews. In addition to the discursive data, some quantitative information concerning the respondents' socioeconomic characteristics and the structural features of their farms was gathered. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and entered into the NVIVO qualitative data analysis software program.

### **The relationship between labour and resource exchange and social capital**

The interviews revealed that there were two main areas where farmers regularly exchanged resources in the local community, namely, machinery and labour. Information is also exchanged between local farmers but the study demonstrated that this typically extends far beyond the local area. In contrast, machinery and labour sharing are limited by geographical distance and as such more ably demonstrate the role of 'continent relations' to social and cultural capital development.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Machinery*

Farm equipment is potentially a key area of exchange in farming communities. As the price of machinery increases, the likelihood that smaller farms have the economies of scale to support expensive machinery declines, thus providing an opportunity for potential cost savings through co-operative action. Machinery prices have been increasing across Europe in the last decade and consequently, machinery sharing is being touted as an important means of reducing costs. In a study of farm business change in the Exmoor area (a marginal area with a long farming tradition similar to Upper Deeside), Lobley and Potter (2004) found that 20 per cent of farmers had increased their use of machinery sharing between 1998 and 2004 while none had decreased or stopped sharing it.

In terms of its accumulation of capital, machinery represents capital in two key areas. Firstly, given the financial cost of its purchase, it represents a considerable investment of economic capital on the part of the farmer. Secondly, machinery can act as objectified cultural capital, in Bourdieu's conceptualisation (Burton *et al.* 2008). Cultural capital in its objectified state is evident through the possession of high-status cultural goods and is visible in conventional farming cultures through high-status symbols of production such as modern machinery (Holloway 2004), quality livestock (Gray 1998) or large grain silos in the USA (Rogers 1983). A key aspect of objectified cultural capital is that its symbolic value is not in the object itself (which could be obtained through a simple financial transaction) but is instead dependent on its use

in accordance with a specific purpose, as actioned through the embodied cultural capital of the agent. For example, purchasing machinery that is economically too large for its purpose or that the farmer is not skilled enough to use properly may be seen as frivolous or 'showy' (Burton 1998) and detract from, rather than contribute to, the overall cultural capital of the farmer.

The results from this study suggest that the cost of modern machinery may have an impact on the informal sharing practices of farmers. Most respondents indicated that they do a small amount of informal equipment sharing – typically pieces that are not expensive and not in high demand. However, the cost of larger machinery means that the potential loss of economic capital involved in sharing the resource often outweighs any advantages in terms of social capital generation (as measured by the chance of reciprocal actions). For example, Farmer 14 stated:

Especially, if its machinery that you know, is not going to cost a fortune to repair. You wouldn't let your good tractor go, or you wouldn't let your good loader go because they are expensive machines. The likes of cement mixers, rollers, levellers, they are not going to do any harm to them.

An important point to make here is that machinery that is robust and cheap is readily loaned (and sometimes jointly owned), but expensive and easily damaged machines are not.<sup>4</sup>

Two things may encourage the sharing of pieces of machinery: social capital and cultural capital. Social capital, in the form of obligations to kin, was found to be strong enough to warrant the sharing of expensive machinery. Where farmers did loan out expensive equipment it was generally only to other family members. For example, Farmer 22 was able to borrow his uncle's new baler. Farmers also expected access on an emergency basis. Farmer 8 described several informal practices of sharing inexpensive machinery with a neighbour. Although he would not expect to borrow an expensive piece of machinery from his neighbour on a regular basis, he anticipated that he could count on the neighbour in an emergency: 'if we are stuck for a tractor or something they would give us a shot, I am sure, to keep us going'. This is an example of how social capital embedded in the contingent relations of neighbouring farmers, augmented by years of successful reciprocity with inexpensive machines, led to 'durable obligations' not only to reciprocity in kind, but to additional access in specific situations.

This emergency response did not appear to extend to neighbours who did not have this history of positive interactions. Farmer 1 described the breakdown in his relationship with a neighbouring farmer, where his successful purchase of a land parcel had alienated the neighbour who also wanted the land. Whereas prior to that point their relations had been positive, after the farm purchase 'we wouldn't ask them [for help] and there is no way they would ask us'. This is a case where expression of cultural capital (a farm sufficiently profitable as to fund expansion could be considered a sign of 'good farming') and the pursuit of economic capital through economies of scale destroyed the social capital between two neighbours. It is particularly notable that the incident in question was an economic transaction apparently unrelated to reciprocal neighbour relations. Respondents routinely identified the potential for falling out with neighbours as a reason to refrain from sharing equipment.

Although there was no evidence in the study that farming skill (cultural capital) led to the shared access to expensive pieces of machinery, this did appear to be the case for cheaper pieces of machinery. In the study farmers identified neighbours with whom they would not share any machinery. Farmer 15 expressed reluctance to share equipment based on his personal observation that 'some of the neighbours are not so good with the machines'. This also extends to the reputation of the farmer as a good farmer on the basis of farming skills apparently unrelated to machinery use, such as livestock husbandry:

One farmer in particular, I will not mention any names like, but leaving dead sheep carcasses lying everywhere and not picking them up.... The overall health of his sheep is not very good, like ... the same farmer wouldn't share, I suppose he would share but I would never give him any of my stuff because it would just come back broken. (Farmer 16)

As a consequence, the reputation of the farmer as a good farmer may contribute to the loaning of machinery simply on the basis that the machinery is less likely to be damaged in use.

A third option is to formalise the sharing practice, such that transactions are largely reduced to economic capital. Rather than sharing expensive pieces of equipment, farmers in the study site routinely contract services from each other. The selection of contractors is based on the level of fee charged, the availability and the skill of the farmer involved, as made evident through their previous performance and the observation of the farmer's actions on their own farm. Successor 4 described a neighbouring farmer who is no longer hired to do contract work because of the high speed and rough use of his machinery, which results in poor performance. Good farmers are thus more likely to be hired to do contract work. The formalised system of sharing avoids the difficulties encountered in informal systems in two ways. Firstly, exchanges are largely reduced to economic capital and the contractor assumes the economic risk of equipment damage. Secondly, the machinery is invariably operated by the owner (or a trusted employee), thus bypassing the potential economic loss to the owner through the lack of the borrower's embodied cultural capital (skill).

Farmers in the region also commonly employed formalised machinery sharing systems: 'machinery rings' whereby access to contractors (equipment and labour) is centrally organised by an administrative body. Unlike formal contracting, there is no favouritism and no benefits to be gained through possessing higher levels of social or cultural capital, as the system is neutral in this sense. Transactions are reduced completely to economic capital. However, larger farmers are often seen to be getting favourable treatment (for example, Farmer 1 suggested that he was less advantaged by the system 'because there are big companies to go to first') and smaller scale farmers may not have sufficient acreage for it to be worthwhile for machinery ring contractors to travel. This view was expressed particularly by farmers in the west of the study site, who were the furthest from the machinery ring. Thus, although small-scale farmers could be expected to benefit the most from the machinery ring, owing to their inability to afford large pieces of machinery they are not best placed to draw on this service, particularly if they are located in a remote area. Remote and small-scale farmers may thus be more dependent on accessing contract work or informal co-operation with neighbours.



*Labour*

The key difference between the exchange of machinery and the exchange of labour amongst farmers lies in the relative economic capital value of the two. While the capital value of machinery is high, farmers recognise that the economic return on labour invested is minimal. At the same time, however, it is also essential for the generation of economic capital and study site farmers recognise that labour is a resource that is both a critical and scarce. Farmers indicated that reduced labour availability both contributes to emergency labour-sharing and also acts as a deterrent from regularised sharing due to its lack of availability. This includes the lack of neighbours in general (in the west of the site) and also the shortage of labour on-farm:

We couldn't do it before because I was tight on labour myself, but so were a lot of other farmers, but now there is my son home there are times when we are quieter so we might go to the neighbour and help him work that way. (Farmer 16)

As far as labour exchange is concerned, the critical importance in the transfer of non-economic capital is in emergency situations such as assisting with a difficult calving. In this case, providing labour is seen as part of good neighbouring. Farmers would not expect to share labour over a continuous period of weeks or months, although they might call on a neighbour for emergency assistance several times a year. There were instances in the study where farmers reported a similar ethic associated with a family loss – the expectation that neighbours would assist on the farm in the event of a funeral or other important family need.

In addition to emergency situations, a number of farmers also establish more permanent labour exchange activities, helping each other at particularly busy times of the year and for labour-intensive tasks such as silaging.<sup>5</sup> In the study site, these arrangements were commonly on a one-to-one basis where families established strong social relations with other families. For example, Farmer 1 observes:

We share with one farmer, we do his silage work and he comes and works with us at silage time. But that's the only [time]. His son comes and does some odds and ends here but we have worked it out, we sit down every year, we never give each other a bill. It works out within a couple of quid every year back and for.

This observation illustrates that while the labour exchange is an informal one, nevertheless, the value of the exchange can be carefully calculated, to the point where the farmers sit together to estimate the relative value of the work. Farmers 15 and 23 related similar stories, particularly as regards the carting of silage, which is a labour-intensive and critical (time-limited) task requiring more than one person to be working simultaneously. The lack of a formal agreement is suggestive of social capital between the participants, but the one-to-one nature of these partnerships makes them easier to monitor and ensure equal exchange.

*Co-development of cultural and social capital*

One-to-one arrangements are not the only type of labour-sharing activity between smaller farmers. Historically, sheep shearing was a communal activity, with local

farmers gathering on individual farms to undertake shearing as a group. However, as in other forms of labour sharing, farmers currently prefer one-to-one arrangements. The decline of this activity demonstrates one of the negative consequences of social capital embedded in a group: the inability of outsiders to draw on this resource. Farmer 17 described how, when they first moved to the area, his father decided not to join in the communal sheep-shearing practice of his new neighbours:

Dad made his mind up when we came up here. He said, 'No. I have seen it done before', he said, 'I am a newcomer... I will go around for a fortnight helping everybody else gather sheep and that', and he said 'It will come to them coming and helping me', and he said 'Half of them won't turn up', he said. 'I always be last'.

The concerns illustrated are twofold. This farmer recognised his low level of social capital as a newcomer to the group but also the weak obligations that would be developed between himself and the other farmers through a large group activity. He chose instead to use contract shearers, thus reducing the transaction to economic capital, in order to eliminate the risk of unreciprocated labour. By the time of the study, most sheep shearing had been reduced to one-to-one relationships between farmers or contract shearers.

This is not to say that there were no examples of ongoing reciprocal action based in groups. In one instance a group of four tenant farmers were working together to produce silage on each others' farms. Interestingly, the practice had developed over a period of decades from the simple exchange of labour to each farmer owning a different (and expensive) piece of silaging equipment necessary for achieving the job. The key facilitating factor here was the extended period of residency for the farmers involved, which had enabled an accumulative build up of social capital within the group. We observe increasing trust levels in groups that have moved from a situation of exchanging labour to sharing machinery and, more to the point, establishing a system that minimises economic capital investment by allocating each farmer a particular part of the process. Social capital is thus substituted for economic capital in accessing silaging equipment and associated labour. The additional economic risks that this represents, should farmers fail to meet social obligations, are lowered by the minimal social risk of failure. However, the strength of the social obligations developed in this group make it unlikely that newcomers would be welcome, limiting benefits to current participants.

An interesting feature of the example of group silaging is that sharing in this manner (buying different pieces of machinery) goes against what is, in many cases, a strongly competitive approach to purchasing equipment. As an objectified symbol of farming ability, there is cultural and social capital to be gained from having better equipment than your neighbour (see Rogers 1983; Burton 2004). One of the successors (5) interviewed observes, for example:

It seems to be that one farm will go and buy a combine, a forager, the balers and all the rest of it and then his neighbour will buy exactly the same thing.

This suggests that, in order for this type of machinery or labour sharing to occur, both the social capital level amongst the group and the economic necessity of the individual farmers need to be high enough to ensure that social competitiveness in this field is

not an issue. In a sense, it breaks with what may be seen as standard social practice amongst farmers – that of competition for high-status cultural goods in order to be seen to be a good farmer (as maintaining a prosperous farm is a symbol of good farming – Farmers 6 and 15) and, as Farmer 12, observes, big farms ‘have got all the equipment we need to do most of the jobs that we do’. Thus, maintaining an array of machinery has, at least in the past, been seen as an indicator of good farming. In part, this may also have been driven by farmers’ strong sense of independence, which has been an important part of the good farmer identity in past decades (for example, Gasson 1973; Gray 1998). Having one’s own machinery also assists in the generation of both cultural and economic capital as having one’s own equipment means that farmers ‘can get going when they want to’ (Successor 3), and successfully harvest the arable crop during the short period when it is ideal (Farmer 4), thus achieving the optimal yields identified as important to having a good farming identity in Burton’s (2004) work. However, ongoing reductions in both farm labour and farm returns have necessitated a change in this attitude and sharing machinery is no longer, according to Farmer 8, considered by some to be the sign of one’s inability to successfully manage the farm operation. ‘Before it was only if it was like a breakdown ... whereas now it’s accepted that you borrow his one.’

#### *The role of reputation in generating social capital*

Thus far this analysis has pointed to the exchange of labour and machinery as a potential means for generating social capital in farming communities. However, the exchange of machinery and labour is not the only factor of importance here. We suggest that, in terms of borrowing machinery, the level of embodied cultural capital in the form of farming skills (such as livestock husbandry) is important in the decision to exchange, not for social reasons but rather because of the lower risk of loss of economic capital.

If the creation of durable obligations is through repeated positive interactions between neighbours, as suggested by Bourdieu, then it is clear that the key to sustaining social capital lies in maintaining positive interactions or, at least, in having a reputation for maintaining positive interactions. A reputation can be established visually, through roadside farming (as observed by Burton 2004), where specific observations from the roadside are more general indicators of farming ability or the personality of the farmers themselves. Interestingly, this does not appear to be connected solely with specific sharing behaviour but is connected with their general reputation of being a good farmer and good neighbour in the region. Farmer 17 links it to being trustworthy:

We heard about a farmer last year, [name], this is the boy that does my contract silage making. He went over and helped him clip his sheep, 2 or 3 days clipping sheep and then they were away to start clipping theirs and they phoned up: ‘Oh, we are busy with silage.’ ... He said he did come in about half past eight at night after he had finished his silage.

In this case the level of trust between the farmer and ‘the boy that does my contract silage making’ has clearly influenced his beliefs about the trustworthiness of a third party. This illustrates how having high levels of social capital can assist in your version

of events becoming the accepted reality by others. Incidences of non-reciprocity that occur between two farmers are likely to have an influence beyond those two individuals as they become established as part of the farmers' reputation in the local community.

The important observation from this section is that there are two key ways in which a reputation for being a good farmer and good neighbour can be built: through displays of farming ability (embodied cultural capital) and through a reputation for complying with unwritten reciprocal agreements. A reputation for compliance, again, may be seen as a form of capital in that it represents the individual's understanding of the symbolic meaning of the reciprocal arrangements. A farmer who can produce symbols of good farming and demonstrate an understanding of the unwritten rules of the farming community thus has a greater ability to exchange machinery or labour, or both, than one who does not; enabling the further development of social capital. Capital can also be lost if farmers fail to maintain symbols of good farming. If they appear to be damaging machinery, are inattentive to livestock or fail to comply with unwritten norms of exchange (including disagreements over property), then their social capital with other farmers can decline.

## Discussion

In this article we have argued that cultural capital is important in the generation of social capital. Our general results are consistent with those of Putnam and Coleman – that existing social capital leads to more social capital, as existing relationships are reinforced through ongoing interactions. However, in using the more nuanced theoretical perspective of Bourdieu, the importance of contingent relations and trade-offs between types of capital: social, cultural and economic, emerged as important. In this section we discuss how study findings advance thinking on social capital development in farming communities, how interventions might usefully be developed and where these could most usefully be targeted.

### *Generating social capital*

Consistent with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of contingent relations, farmers in this study are largely born into a group – neighbouring farmers – and have access to a set of basic group resources as a result: that is, physical labour and cultural capital associated with farming skills. By belonging to this group, members have access to labour, and occasionally machinery, on an emergency basis (which can range from difficult calving to a family funeral or the breakdown of a tractor during harvest). Farmers build on this foundation through the selective reinforcement of one-to-one relationships within this group. In this study, these one-to-one relationships accessed through social capital appear to be largely limited to inexpensive pieces of equipment and labour, unless further facilitated by family relationships, extensively developed neighbouring ties (as in the case of the group who silage together) or high levels of cultural capital. Riskier exchanges are formalised, either through contracting or the machinery ring.

This analysis of contingent relations raises several issues, particularly the importance of other types of capital to social capital development. Bourdieu was clear that social capital is not developed or drawn on in isolation from other capital types. In this

article we have argued that social capital inherent in families and cultural capital influence informal access to resources. From the analysis it is clear that the interplay between physical resources and economic capital also plays an important role. The relatively low levels of informal sharing between neighbouring farmers appears to be partly due to the investment of economic capital (and resultant risk) associated with the informal exchange of expensive machinery. Recent generations have seen an increase in mechanisation, with farm labour replaced by ever more efficient (and expensive) farm machinery. Ward (1993) conceptualises the agricultural treadmill as a 'logic' of the intensification of production embedded in farming culture, resulting from the production-oriented policies and economic structures of the post-World War II period. Increased production was achieved through increased technological use, leading to an increased income for farm households. This became embedded in farming culture: the purchase of new and more expensive machinery (when chosen and utilised appropriately) contributes to cultural capital development (Burton 2004). However, it appears to have had a damaging impact on social capital, increasing individualisation in farming as farm households became able to supply all their own labour needs with the assistance of machinery and are less willing to risk this investment to informal sharing processes. The high cost of machinery and repairs and the reduced reliance on labour thus created a disincentive for informal co-operation, which has only recently begun to reverse, due to economic duress. However, instead of sharing large pieces of machinery, it is the small-scale, low-risk machinery that is re-embedded in social networks and large equipment is exchanged through formal contracts where risks are easily calculated.

The calculation of risk is part of the apparent commoditisation of agricultural practices evident in the study sites. Instead of groups working together, farmers negotiate exchange on a one-to-one basis and carefully monitor the return, even if no money changes hands. In this way, commoditisation is a process of reducing forms of capital to economic capital in order to regulate exchange, which is arguably part of a mind shift from 'farm' to 'business'. These trade-offs between capital types becomes embedded in habitus – socialised norms and expectations that shape their 'disposition to act' towards culturally accepted standards.

In Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualisation, all capital types are produced by and to a degree are reducible to labour (rather than economic capital). This relationship is not strictly quantifiable – farmers in this study, for example, clearly prefer to reduce capital to economic values when attempting to reduce risk – and types of capital can build on each other to create wealth. Labour does not simply generate economic capital, it also develops shared symbolic meanings through practice (cultural capital) and reciprocal social obligations (social capital). The shortage of farm labour is thus a key to the relatively small amount of sharing that is occurring in the study site. Limitations to labour not only limit the time farmers have available to help neighbours, it also limits the time they have to build up the social capital foundations necessary to enable broader sharing. Neither can they risk losing their own valuable time through co-operation with an untested neighbour who may not reciprocate. In addition, the lack of time may be destroying cultural capital, as the hurried completion of farm tasks can be expected to result in lower quality cultural symbols and thus in less trust from neighbouring farmers.

Consideration of time issues – specifically labour time – is a critical weakness of current thinking surrounding the use of social capital. Social capital is touted as a low-cost means of increasing economic wealth because the cost of the labour time involved is rarely considered. In this study we have demonstrated the trade-offs between types of resource. Interventions based on social capital may be quite successful in areas where labour is abundant (and therefore cheap), as may be the case in many developing countries, but they are much less so in areas where labour is not. It areas of labour shortage, which clearly includes the farmers in this study, investing in social capital is a high risk not only because of the economic capital invested but also because of the potential labour losses.

#### *How can social capital be facilitated?*

Actively seeking to facilitate social capital development is a difficult issue, not least because it is widely accepted in the social capital literature that strongly developed social capital can also have negative effects through rent seeking and other types of monopolistic behaviour that restrict the flow of capital (for example, Atterton 2007). The development of social capital also takes considerable time (Bourdieu 1986) and may not result in measurable benefits over the short to medium term, which makes it difficult to evaluate the cost effectiveness of intervention. Traditional social capital-building recommendations include encouraging new forms of organisation, stimulating new forms of linkages between groups and public agencies and enabling individuals and organisations to be more flexible and adaptable to changing situations (Shucksmith 2000). In this section we make a cautious attempt to go beyond these efforts to use a broader perspective based on ideas resulting from this present analysis.

At a very basic level, in order to build social capital through contingent relations there must be a group from which to draw. Due to the increase in business size and the decreasing number of people operating and working on farms, the quantitative number of farming neighbours who have the necessary human and cultural capital to be credible group members has reduced. In the west of the study site some respondents indicated that they had no farming neighbours at all. The issue is one of both skill and availability: even remote farmers typically have several neighbours but often these individuals have no credibility in the required skills. It is clear from the study that not every farmer achieves the status of being a good farmer and our results suggest that relatively few do and that reputation is a matter of degree. Neighbours may also be ‘hobby farmers’ or non-farmers enjoying other rural amenities. Investment in skill development and displaying these achievements through funding agricultural fairs and rural adult and youth organisations is one option for addressing this issue. Paid apprenticeships to agriculture or work experience programmes in rural schools are also possibilities. The key issue is not just facilitating the development of the skills, but also their display.

Many of the current CAP Pillar 2 subsidy schemes encourage farmers to compete with each other for funding, thereby reducing their motivation to exchange ideas or work together. As demonstrated in this study, the implications of this kind of programme go beyond this to include the active destruction of existing neighbourly relations when one farmer is perceived as gaining an advantage. However, simply

structuring subsidy schemes to encourage farmers to co-operate is insufficient to address this issue. It is also clear from the study that there are neighbours with whom farmers prefer not to co-operate, apparently for very good reasons. Subsidies requiring that all farmers in a particular region work together are thus also likely to be unsuccessful. Similarly, Pillar 2 schemes typically require a 5-year commitment to programme activities enforced through a financial penalty and repayment. In a co-operative arrangement farmers must not be put at risk of their neighbour's defaulting.

Farmers would not appreciate the suggestion that economic duress leads to the development of social capital, although this is clearly the case in the study site at present. In previous decades access to expensive equipment (arguably due in part to higher farm profitability) led to individualisation and the loss of social capital through the process described earlier. Had this investment been in labour, the pattern of social capital use is likely to have been different. The industrialisation and intensification of agriculture is no longer a goal of agricultural policy in the UK (although with recent food security concerns this may be changing). Many farmers in the study site have clearly continued to pursue this highly productivist agenda. This raises the question of where social capital interventions are best targeted.

#### *Where to target social capital generation*

Social capital-based exchanges may appear quite limited in the study site. However, it is important not to underestimate the importance of the emergency resources that are available to the group. The longevity of family farming has long been linked to the seasonal nature of labour needs on the farm and the willingness of farm families to work long and varying hours to meet these needs, thus enabling them to compete with more capitalist farm businesses (Friedmann 1980). Although the farms in the study had typically increased in scale over recent decades, the relative amount of labour has decreased, leaving a number of farmers the sole individual working on the farm, a 'one-man band', in respondent's terms. The emergency services of neighbours become essential to the viability of the farm as formal services need to be arranged in advance and as such are not suitable for responding to sudden demands, as is the case with a difficult lambing or calving or a family emergency. One of the primary reasons respondents gave for not informally sharing more machinery with their neighbours is that formalised sharing helped maintain the neighbour relationship by not jeopardising this base level of existing trust.

The farmers who benefit most from social capital are those most reliant on it: single-operator, small-scale and remote farmers who have no hired labour, and limited access to formal services or contracting. Although we have argued that cultural capital can lead to social capital, and it would appear that good farmers are in the best position to generate and draw on social capital stocks, the relationship is not that clear-cut. Good farmers by nature tend to operate larger farms with more staff, due to the history of economic success which underlies the good farmer principle. They are therefore less likely to need or want to access resources socially, unless these resources are not available commercially. Indeed, in their efforts to 'get ahead' through land acquisition (also a scarce resource), good farmers may damage the development of social capital. Social capital development thus may not be appropriate

in areas where large, highly commercial farms dominate and commercial exchange is embedded in the farming culture. It is, therefore, remote, smaller scale and possibly less overtly successful farmers who are more likely to actively develop and utilise social capital relationships. It is also quite likely that low-input farmers will utilise social capital as their investment in technology is less. We therefore suggest that social capital intervention is most likely to be beneficial in remote regions and when targeted at small-to-medium and low-input farms.

## Conclusion

In this article we have argued that it is important to go beyond the circular logic of Putnam and explore the implications of the more theoretically sound perspective of Bourdieu. In so doing, we have demonstrated the importance of cultural capital, trade-offs between types of capital and labour, in particular, to social capital development. Utilising Bourdieu's conceptualisation, it is clear that social capital is not the cheap answer to rural development that policymakers might wish it to be and that careful consideration is required as to the type of interventions and population at which they are targeted, if intervention is to have the intended results.

## Notes

\* Corresponding author.

<sup>1</sup> Although there was no mention of negative aspects of social capital in his 1993 book, Putnam does acknowledge it in his 2000 text.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu sometimes refers to this prestige as 'symbolic capital'.

<sup>3</sup> By limiting our analysis to contingent relations we are also limiting the assessment to bonding social capital, which ties socially homogenous groups together, as opposed to bridging capital, which links diverse social groups (Putnam 2000).

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence of the co-ownership of expensive pieces of machinery in other studies (for example, De Toro and Hanson 2004) but this was not found in this present study.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of labour exchange for the performance of labour-intensive farming tasks has also been noted in the case of Mongolian pastoral communities (Upton 2008).

## Acknowledgements

This research was jointly funded by the Scottish Government Rural and Environment Research and Analysis Directorate and the EU Framework Programme 6 New and Emerging Science and Technology Pathfinder Initiative on Tackling Complexity in Science. The authors wish to thank Nick Gotts of the Macaulay Institute and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article.

## References

- Archer, M.S. and J.Q. Titter (2000) *Rational choice theory: resisting colonisation* (London: Routledge)
- Atterton, J. (2007) The 'strength of weak ties': social networking by business owners in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. *Sociologia Ruralis* 47 (3) pp. 228–245
- Barrow, C.J. and H. Hicham (2000) Two complimentary and integrated land uses of the western High Atlas Mountains, Morocco: the potential for sustainable rural livelihoods. *Applied Geography* 20 (4) pp. 369–394



- Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital. pp. 241–258 in J. Richardson ed., *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press)
- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press)
- Burt, R.S. (2004) Structural holes and good ideas. *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (2) pp. 349–399
- Burton, R. (1998) The role of farmer self-identity in agricultural decision-making in the Marston Vale Community Forest. Unpublished PhD thesis (Leicester: Department of Geography, De Montfort University)
- Burton, R. (2004) Seeing through the ‘good farmer’s’ eyes: towards developing an understanding of the social symbolic value of ‘productivist’ behaviour. *Sociologia Ruralis* 44 (2) pp. 195–215
- Burton, R. and G.A. Wilson (1999) The Yellow Pages as a sampling frame for farm surveys: assessing potential bias in agri-environmental research. *Journal of Rural Studies* 15 (1) pp. 91–102
- Burton, R., C. Kuczera and G. Schwarz (2008) Exploring farmers’ cultural resistance to voluntary agri-environmental schemes. *Sociologia Ruralis* 48 (1) pp. 16–37
- Coleman, J. (1988) Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (Suppl) pp. S95–S120
- Coleman, J.S. (1990) *Foundations of social theory* (London: Harvard University Press)
- D’Haese, M.F.C., G. Huylenbroeck and L. D’Haese (2005) Collective action in a complex institutional environment. A case study of small-scale wool growers in South Africa. *Outlook on Agriculture* 34 (1) pp. 33–40
- De Toro, A. and P.A. Hanson (2004) Machinery co-operatives: a case study in Sweden. *Biosystems Engineering* 87 (1) pp. 13–25
- Friedmann, H. (1980) Household production and the national economy: concepts for the analysis of agrarian formations. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 7 (2) pp. 158–184
- Fukuyama, F. (2000) Social capital and civil society. Working Paper, IMF Institute; presented at the IMF Institute conference on ‘Second Generation Reforms’, November 8–9, 1999
- Gasson, R. (1973) Goals and values of farmers. *Journal of Agricultural Economics* 24 (3) pp. 521–542
- Gray, J. (1998) Family farms in the Scottish borders: a practical definition by hill farmers. *Journal of Rural Studies* 14 (3) pp. 241–356
- Gustafson, C.R. and W.E. Nganje (2006) Value of social capital to mid-sized northern plains farms. *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics* 54 (3) pp. 421–438
- Holloway, L. (2004) Showing and telling farming: agricultural shows and re-imaging British agriculture. *Journal of Rural Studies* 20 (3) pp. 319–330
- Holt, L. (2008) Embodied social capital and geographic perspectives: performing the habitus. *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2) pp. 227–242
- Kilpatrick, S. (2002) Learning and building social capital in a community of family farm businesses. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 21 (5) pp. 446–461
- Lee, J., A. Árnason, A. Nightingale and M. Shucksmith (2005) Networking: social capital and identities in European rural development. *Sociologia Ruralis* 45 (4) pp. 269–283
- Lin, N. (2001) *Social capital. A theory of social structure and action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Lobley, M. and C. Potter (2004) Agricultural change and restructuring: recent evidence from a survey of agricultural households in England. *Journal of Rural Studies* 20 (4) pp. 499–510
- Martinez-Brawley, E.E. and J. Blundall (1989) Farm families’ preferences toward the personal social services. *Social Work* 11 pp. 513–522
- Mathijs, E. (2003) Social capital and farmers’ willingness to adopt countryside stewardship schemes. *Outlook on Agriculture* 32 (1) pp. 13–16
- Nardone, G., R. Sisto and A. Lopolito (2010) Social capital in the LEADER initiative: a methodological approach. *Journal of Rural Studies* 26 (1) pp. 63–72

- O'Brien, D.J., V.V. Patsiorokovski and L.D. Dershem (2000) *Household capital and the agrarian question in Russia* (Aldershot: Ashgate)
- Portes, A. (1998) Social capital: its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 pp. 1–24
- Portes, A. (2000) The two meanings of social capital. *Sociological Forum* 15 (1) pp. 1–12
- Putnam, R. (1993) *Making democracy work: civic traditions in modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon and Schuster)
- Rogers, E.M. (1983) *Diffusion of innovations* 3rd edn (New York: Free Press)
- Swartz, D. (1997) *Culture and power. The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (London: University of Chicago Press)
- Sharp, J.S. (2001) Locating the community field: a study of interorganizational network structure and capacity for community action. *Rural Sociology* 66 (3) pp. 403–424
- Shortall, S. (2004) Social or economic goals, civic inclusion or exclusion? An analysis of rural development theory and practice. *Sociologia Ruralis* 44 (1) pp. 109–123
- Shortall, S. (2009) Are rural development programmes socially inclusive? Social inclusion, civic engagement, participation and social capital: exploring the differences. *Journal of Rural Studies* 25 (1) pp. 168–169
- Shucksmith, M. (2000) Endogenous development, social capital and social inclusion: perspectives from LEADER in the UK. *Sociologia Ruralis* 40 (2) pp. 208–218
- Small, L. (2002) Social capital for development: what does it mean when there isn't any? *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 13 (1) pp. 7–25
- Sobels, J., A. Curtis and S. Lockie (2001) The role of Landcare group networks in rural Australia: exploring the contribution of social capital. *Journal of Rural Studies* 17 (3) pp. 265–276
- Sutherland, L. and T. Glendinning (2008) Farm family coping with stress: the impact of the 1998 ice storm. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 39 (4) pp. 527–543
- Svendson, G.L.H. and G.T. Svendsen (2000) Measuring social capital: the Danish co-operative dairy movement. *Sociologia Ruralis* 40 (1) pp. 72–86
- Swartz, D.L. (2003) In Memoriam: Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) drawing inspiration from Bourdieu's sociology of symbolic power. *Theory and Society* 32 (5–6) pp. 519–528
- Upton, C. (2008) Social capital, collective action and group formation: developmental trajectories in post-socialist Mongolia. *Human Ecology* 36 (2) pp. 175–188
- Ward, N. (1993) The agricultural treadmill and the rural environment in the post-productivist era. *Sociologia Ruralis* 33 (3–4) pp. 348–364
- Warriner, G.K. and T.M. Moul (2002) Kinship and personal communication network influences on the adoption of agriculture conservation technology. *Journal of Rural Studies* 8 (3) pp. 279–291
- World Bank (2011) World bank social capital in operations. Available online at <http://go.worldbank.org/YUG88Z89So> Accessed 15 March 2011

**Lee-Ann Sutherland\***

James Hutton Institute

Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen AB41 8JX

UK

e-mail: [lee-ann.sutherland@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:lee-ann.sutherland@hutton.ac.uk)

**Rob J.F. Burton**

Centre for Rural Research

N-7491 Trondheim

Norway

e-mail: [rob.burton@bygdeforskning.no](mailto:rob.burton@bygdeforskning.no)