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Constrained Entrepreneurship in UK agriculture: A Weberian analysis

Abstract

This conceptual paper draws on Max Weber's Iron Cage metaphor to explore its value in understanding how farmers are responding to the institutional contexts that influence and constrain entrepreneurial activities. We create Ideal Types of farmers, farm businesses and farm business strategies to provide a nuanced understanding into the heterogeneous ways Upland farmers are navigating and responding to ever-shifting Constrained Institutional Contexts (CIC's). We examine Weber's original cage metaphor, and draw on its limitations by framing it alternatively to provide a unique lens to examine the UK farming context. We add clarity into how farmers are responding to the challenges arising from the contexts within which they operate, providing a strong theoretical underpinning that can be used by other scholars to examine constrained rural entrepreneurship.

Key words

Constrained Entrepreneurship; Ideal Types; Weber; Farm typology; farmer strategies

1.0 Introduction

This conceptual paper discusses constrained entrepreneurship in the context of the UK's agricultural sector by drawing on classical sociological theory. Max Weber's (1905/2005) iron cage metaphor is used to examine how farmers navigate and respond to the Constrained Institutional Contexts (CIC's) that influence farm entrepreneurship. The largely overlooked phenomenon of 'constrained entrepreneurship' (McElwee, 2008a) is explored and conceptually developed to examine the formal and informal institutional barriers that constrain the entrepreneurial activity of UK upland farming businesses. The paper locates agricultural contexts and [entrepreneurial] actor responses as a frame for creating Weberian influenced Ideal Types of farmers, farm businesses and farm business strategies. The typology provides a nuanced understanding of the heterogeneous ways in which upland farmers are navigating and responding to ever-shifting CIC's.

UK Agricultural Context

Agricultural businesses play a fundamental role in supporting national and international policy goals, with farming activities producing strong economic, social and environmental contributions. UK agriculture contributes 0.5% towards GDP and employs a labour force of 1.5% (466,200 workers) (DEFRA, 20220). Promoting entrepreneurship in the sector can help better deliver these societal benefits and contributions, particularly as the industry no longer benefits from European agricultural subsidies. New grants, subsidies and income streams resulting from policy formation around '*public money for public goods*' under the deliverance of Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs) *could* be a means to generate increased contributions, yet significant policy changes might be problematic for some farmers reliant on land-based payments under the Basic Payments Scheme (BPS). Entrepreneurially Orientated (EO) farmers engaged in innovative thinking, proactive behaviour and risk-taking are often able to sustain the economic performance of farming enterprises in response to macro and micro-economic challenges (Smith et al., 2021). Indeed, as the political and economic uncertainties resulting from Brexit, the development of Domestic Agricultural Policy (DAP), COVID-19 and, more recently, the invasion of Ukraine intensifies, entrepreneurial and strategic thinking capabilities are becoming increasingly necessary and useful for farmers (Gittins, 2021; Chapman, 2022). However, these capabilities are not possessed by all farmers and the sector is facing increasing socio-political challenges in line with wider policy transformations. The challenges alone make the UK's agricultural sector an interesting context for investigation.

UK farmers are living and operating in increasingly unprecedented times. The removal of the EU's BPS by 2028 threatens the economic sustainability of many UK farming businesses. Farm profitability is a prominent industry challenge and in 2018,

for example, upland farmers made an annual Farm Business Income of just £15,500 (Defra, 2018). The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has created a situation of strong economic reliance on subsidies and grants, with many farm businesses making a net-loss on agricultural activities, and rural wages lagging significantly behind those in urban regions (European Commission, 2017). These economic issues make farming an unattractive industry for new entrants.

Globally, agriculture is also seeing increased calls for enhanced sustainability, with farmers being supported by policymakers and influenced by pressure groups to adopt more environmentally friendly practices to deliver local, national and international objectives (Sher et al., 2019). Farming is deeply connected with the natural environment, with agricultural land comprising 71% of the UK's total land mass (Defra, 2021). Farmer actions and responses to the institutional environment thus extend beyond economic factors, and many farmers are beginning to analyse the environmental impacts of their business operations in alignment with the UK's new Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMs). Entrepreneurship can play an important role in helping some farmers achieve these agri-environmental objectives.

The industry also suffers from an ageing workforce, with the average age of a UK farmer being 59, with farm children often succeeding their parents later in life (Henriques, 2021). Culturally, UK farming is dominated by small-scale family businesses; socio-economic units of analysis, strongly influenced by both business and family needs (Jervell, 2011). The most common route into farming is *via* farm succession, making it a difficult industry for industry outsiders to enter (Lobley, 2010). While policymakers are recognising the impact an ageing workforce has on entrepreneurship and innovation through the creation of schemes (such as the Lump-Sum Exit Scheme (DEFRA, 2022) to encourage new farming entrepreneurs into the sector, it is difficult, given multiple macroeconomic constraints, to gauge the success of such schemes. Indeed, small-scale¹ farming is in decline, with four million farms in the EU failing between the years of 2005 and 2015 (Matthews, 2019) and it remains to be seen how the social dynamics of UK family farming will be influenced by these policy transformations. Further research is therefore needed into the phenomenon of constrained farm entrepreneurship.

Constrained Farm Entrepreneurship: A Need for Investigation

¹ Small-scale farming- We view small-scale farming as being heavily orientated around family dynamics, passed inter-generationally and strongly influenced by culture and heritage. We view it as the opposite of industrial/mega farms operating purely for commercial gain.

Rural entrepreneurship is often viewed as a sub-set of the field, explored by a small number of scholars examining, for example, demographic and psychological traits of rural entrepreneurs, organisational/enterprise characteristics, embeddedness, rurality, policy measures and institutional frameworks (Pato and Teixeira, 2016). However, despite research showing that some rural regions have higher levels of entrepreneurial activities than urban areas (NICRE, 2022), agriculture remains an understudied context for entrepreneurship studies (Fitz-Koch et al., 2018). To alleviate the constraints facing farming businesses and better facilitate entrepreneurship within the sector, in this paper we argue that scholars should seek to examine how CIC's influence farm entrepreneurship. Conceptualising farm entrepreneurship and developing entrepreneurial capabilities is problematic in this context, as many farmers lack the entrepreneurial and business management skillsets that are common in urban industries (McElwee, 2005), while less support is available.

By constrained entrepreneurship we mean the formal and informal institutional forces that restrict entrepreneurial activity. Examples of such forces might include policy changes, farmer skillsets, working with family, location, barriers to entry, rural infrastructure, and bureaucracy (Refai and McElwee, 2022). While some studies have implicitly identified some of the constraints facing farmers (i.e., barriers to farm productivity and issues around farm technology adoption (Bowen and Morris, 2019; Franks, 2021), these studies are largely focused on the micro-level and have failed to discuss the deeper theoretical implications of rural actors operating within CIC's. In their literature review on family farming, Sues-Reyes and Fuetsch (2016) argue that future research should provide stronger theoretical underpinnings. Likewise, Pato and Texeira (2014) found a general lack of theory building and development in their bibliometric analysis of the rural entrepreneurship literature. This paper attempts to overcome this 'theoretical deficit' by using and developing a Weberian (1905/2005) framework to investigate the CIC in the context of UK farming.

Our research builds on insights from Refai and McElwee's (2022) work that draws on Weber's Iron Cage of Rationality (ICR) metaphor to examine the CIC's influencing refugee 'subentrepreneurship'². Alongside the critiques and adaptations of other scholars (Klagge, 1997; Weber, 2005; Briscoe, 2007; Ritzer, 2011; Ritzer et al., 2018), this metaphor forms a unique theoretical lens through which to examine the CIC's farmers operate in, while providing scope to develop a typology to categorise how different farmer types navigate and respond to the formal and informal institutional challenges. While Weber's work on ICR is seminal in the fields of sociology, and strongly discussed in some business management sub-fields, such as organisational studies (Clegg and Baumeler, 2010), it is hardly discussed at all in the field of entrepreneurship studies. This is surprising, as Weber himself made many references to entrepreneurship (i.e., 'capitalist spirit') and even focused much of his analysis in

² Subentrepreneurship- A term coined by Refai and McElwee (2022) referring to the forms of self-employment that are undeclared to the authorities, often used by refugees (amongst other actors) as an escape mechanism from their institutional contexts.

agricultural contexts (Honigsheim and Sica, 2000; Hillyard, 2007), yet we were unable to find any studies that utilise Weber's ICR in the context of rural/farm entrepreneurship research.

This led to the formation of our overarching research question, which allows us to respond to call for greater theoretical insight:

- What can we learn about constrained entrepreneurship in UK agriculture using a Weberian lens?

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we outline our conceptual Weberian framework based on an interpretation of Weber's ICR, which is followed by a critique of the iron cage metaphor which informs our application. Second, a Weberian influenced typology is developed to provide a nuanced understanding of the heterogeneous nature of [entrepreneurial] farmers. Third, the typology is contextualized in relation to the cage metaphor and its various adaptations, discussing how farmers are navigating and responding to the challenges of their relative institutional cages. Here we present our own cage variant that takes into consideration the increasing pressure for environmental sustainability in UK and global agricultural practices, before the theoretical contributions and broader implications of this research are discussed.

2.0 Weber

Along with Marx and Durkheim, Max Weber is one the great classical sociologists (Morrison, 2006), whose analysis of power, religion and social order led to the creation and popularisation of many theoretical and philosophical concepts that underpin much contemporary research. Social science research has been informed by Weber's (2003;1905) theories of *inter alia* modernity, bureaucracy and rationalization to investigate various phenomena in organisational contexts. Before introducing the ICR metaphor and discussing its applicability, we first provide an overview of four key concepts: *verstehen*, ideal types, social action and legitimacy, as these concepts have influenced some of our previous work on farm entrepreneurship and are embedded in this article (McElwee, 2008b).

Verstehen

Verstehen is a central concept underpinning Weber's notion of interpretative understanding (Outhwaite, 1975); it means to attempt to empathetically understand aspects of social behaviour by exploring the meaning behind the actions of actors. Through *verstehen*, researchers can explore individual meanings, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions in ways that could never be achieved using the notion of *Erklären* (*to explain*). Much of our prior research has been underpinned with *Verstehen*, conducting qualitative based research of an interpretative/constructionist nature that set out to understand the subjective lived experiences and realities of farmers. Applying

verstehen enables us to make sense of the complex phenomenon of entrepreneurship in rural contexts (McElwee, 2008b).

Ideal Types

Much of Weber's analysis utilises the construction of ideal types, which offer a streamlined and simplified version of reality that can be compared and contrasted with the empirical world (Swedberg, 2018). Weber proposes ideal types for Authority, Social action and Bureaucracy, yet he warned that they should not be mistaken *for* reality, and that they are simply tools that can be used to inform our understanding of the social world. Ideal types of farmers, farm businesses and farm business strategies are outlined later, and while they provide a theoretical basis for generalising how farmers behave, we stress that they are merely models. For example, while some farmers might in reality embody the characteristics of EO farmers or Traditionalist farmers, these are not fixed states. In this paper, ideal types serve as a crucial methodological tool that allows us to compare different types of farmers in complex CIC's, allowing us to move beyond purely empirical insights. Rather, our ideal types are informed by our prior research and knowledge of farm entrepreneurship, our practical experiences of working in farming (and being immersed in rural life), alongside existing conceptualisations of farmers in the literature (McElwee, 2008a).

Legitimacy

Legitimacy is another central theme throughout Weber's work, and it is strongly associated with sociological work on power and domination (i.e., how an actor imposes their will over other actors). Weber advocates that two groups, rulers and the ruled, 'uphold the internalized structures', as both parties must comply something to be legitimate (Swedberg and Agevall, 2016). Weber proposes three ideal types of legitimate authority: traditional, rational and charismatic (Swedberg, 2018).

Traditional authority refers to a legitimate position characterised as 'virtue by authority'; in other words, an obedience to authority resulting from dominating culture and traditions (Weber et al., 2012). Power of this type could have been established following a long-standing tradition. For example, Primogeniture (being the firstborn child) was once common practice in farm succession, with a farm being bequeathed to the oldest son. While charismatic authority relates to the persona of an individual, Weber argues this ideal type allows individuals to be 'set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' (Weber et al., 2012). Here, individuals are seen to have gained power and authority through their charismatic behaviour. Arguably, many successful entrepreneurs possess this charismatic trait which enables them to achieve their personal and business goals. Rational-legal types of authority relate to power not being dictated based on culture, traditions or personality, but by resting on the belief that the democratic systems in place are the most appropriate

(Spencer, 1970). Here, individuals gain power and authority in the most rational way through a legitimate process in which the systems in place are respected. Later, issues around legitimate authority emerges, with conflicts occurring between the ruler (policymakers, landlords etc.) and the ruled (farmers, farm children, tenants etc.).

Social Action

Social action is the core subject matter that underpins Weber's interpretative sociology (Swedberg and Agevall, 2016). An action is regarded as social if it concerns behaviours with attached meanings that are orientated towards others (Weber, 1978). Weber outlines four ideal types: (1) Instrumental rational action (*Zweckrational*), obtaining an end result in the most calculated and efficient manner (2) Value rational action (*Wertrational*), a rational action which involves a conscious belief in absolute values, such as ethical reasons, personal morals and religious beliefs. (3) Affectual action, whereby the emotional state of an individual affects their action. (4) Traditional action, referring to the way things have always been done, such as long-standing tradition, heritage and culture. Weber argued that capitalism promotes increasing instrumental rational action at the cost of a decline in other forms of other social action that underpinned human behaviour before capitalism. Behaviour, both in the workplace and beyond, Weber argued, is becoming increasingly rationalized to increase profits, with bureaucracy as a means of enforcing this ICR (Ritzer, 2011). These four types of social action are useful in understanding the actions of actors in response to the institutional challenges. They are later applied to farmer strategies and inform our typology.

Introducing Weber's Iron Cage

Weber created the imagery in his essay 'The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism'. To this day, the cage metaphor remains complex and difficult to understand. Douglass (2016) suggests that while people 'understand that the trap [i.e., the Iron Cage] has something to do with the character of modern life... it is not clear as to what that something is' (Douglass, 2016: 505). To simplify matters, we could say that while Calvinism was about rewarding individuals for abstinence from worldly pleasures (i.e., the pursuit of material items), for Weber the pursuit of material gain was a fundamental component of capitalism. Actors in society are encouraged to pursue a life of profit, Weber argued, as individuals are born into an economic system of entrapment, from which they are unable to escape; in this sense, teleological efficiency, increasing rationalization and control, coupled with bureaucratic hierarchical structures entrap individuals. This imagery is not too dissimilar to Rousseau's (1964; 1762) view of society, whereby 'man is born free, but ... is everywhere in chains'.

In this context, the iron cage metaphor is symbolic of the increasing rationalization and bureaucracy occurring in *contemporary society*, where every other form of social

action (traditional, affectual and value ration) is replaced by goal rational social action to optimize efficiency for profit. In our research, CICs are discussed in this context to illustrate how different types of farmers respond to the relative institutional challenges they face. We use *verstehen* to explore how actors (farmers) perceive the iron cage, exploring the extent to which institutional environments entrap individuals.

Beyond the Iron Cage

Perhaps one of the most obvious criticisms of the iron cage is its applicability in contemporary society, which differs quite substantially to the days of Weber. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) challenges Weber's cynical view of capitalism in contemporary society. They argue that post-1970 capitalism began to transition to a point whereby managers almost became hero-type figures, such as leaders in entrepreneurship and innovation, engaging in creativity and working towards not only achieving economic goals, but solving societal and environmental challenges. In this view, the modern bureaucratic organisation is not framed negatively, rather it offers forms of structure, safety and income for workers. Likewise, Ritzer's (2011) iron cage adaption, or what he calls the 'McDonaldization of society', also applies the concept of rationalization to modern life. However, Ritzer (2011) uses the term 'rubber cage', implying that people still have choices, particularly the privileged who are able to bend the rubber bars of the cage and pursue other types of social action.

While Weber does also acknowledge some positives associated with bureaucracy, such as supporting organisation and management practices, he criticises its role in enforcing rationalisation and legitimating domination and control (Weber, 1978). Some scholars argue that Weber's notion of ICR omits the benefits of bureaucracy and administration. For example, Briscoe (2007) discusses some positives of bureaucracy within organisations, framing it as a shield that offers protection for employees from the demands of the workplace. Moreover, Ritzer et al. (2018) introduce the 'velvet cage', whereby the current institutional conditions are protecting them from certain harsh realities (Ritzer et al., 2018). Thus, the cage can be perceived as protective and privileging as opposed to restrictive. In other work, the cage appears to be more neutral, flexible and fluid in nature (Klagge, 1997; Ritzer, 2011; Refai and McElwee 2022). For example, Klagge (1997) offers three perspectives for analysing the cage: positive, negative and neutral. First, the cage can be interpreted as a 'prerequisite structure', an essential function of modern society (Klagge, 1997: 66). This is similar to Briscoe's (2007) view, whereby the cage brings positive benefits at the societal, organisational and personal level (i.e., job security, consistent quality, best practice and predictability). Second, the cage can be viewed as a prison, exercising power, control and regulation over those inside, leading to 'Intellectual Stultification' of those trapped in the cage (Weber, 1994: 71). In this account, democracy is lessened, organisations hold power from a top-down authoritarian perspective and meaning is omitted from an individual's life. This can in turn be related, for Weber, to the

sociological concepts of disenchantment, anomie and alienation in the workplace (Swedberg and Agevall, 2016). Finally, Klagge’s (1997) third alteration is that the cage is neutral, relating the metaphor to the ‘monkey bars’ apparatus in a children’s playground. The metaphor here is the cage can produce both positive and negative outcomes in society, depending on who is using the apparatus. Organisations can use bureaucratic structures for good, such as for the protection of worker’s rights and achieving organisational consistency, or bureaucratic structures can be damaging, for example, by stifling creativity and creating a disenchantment in the workplace.

These conceptualisations highlight the relativity in perceptions of Weber’s metaphor and demonstrate its fluid nature in relation to CIC’s (as summarised in Table 1). These are used below to inform our typology of farmers, farm businesses and farm business strategies.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE **Table 1 Variations of the CIC’s**

| Type of Cage | Cage Characteristics | Influences |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| The restrictive cage | The classic Weberian Iron Cage. The cage as restrictive in nature similar to a prison. Individuals feel trapped and do not attempt to leave the cage. Bureaucracy is generally perceived negatively. | Prison (Klagge, 1997; Weber, 2005) |
| The protective cage | The cage offers protection for its inhabitants. Actors inside have no intention of ever leaving the cage. Bureaucracy is perceived in a positive light. They fear the outside world and a change to current institutional conditions. | Velvet/ Shield (Ritzer, 2018) |
| The neutral cage | The cage is neutral. Bureaucracy is both positive and negative to those inside the cage. At first glance the bars appear metallic but are in fact rubber. The cage simply exists, individuals accept the positives and negatives and learn how to navigate accordingly. | Ritzer’s (2011) rubber cage, Klagge’s (1997) cage is neutral. |

3.0 Weberian Influenced Typology: Farmers, Farm Businesses and Farm Business Strategies

This section presents a Weberian-influenced typology of farmers, farm business and farm business strategies used to respond to the CIC’s farmers face and encounter (Table 2) in relation to three variations of the CIC’s summarised in Table 1: the restrictive cage, the neutral cage and the protective cage. While we acknowledge there are several other types of farmers omitted from our typology, we believe our typology is generally reflective of UK farming and allows us to form a proficient and theoretically informed discussion into how farmers respond to the CIC’s.

We have followed three steps to help us develop a sound typology. First, we have examined the rural entrepreneurship literature to understand how prior farmer typologies have been created (McElwee, 2008a), thus allowing us to critically reflect and develop our own contextualized to UK farming. Second, we examined the sociological literature, reading Weber's (1978) discussions around Ideal Types in *Economy and Society*, in addition to drawing inspiration from Swedberg's (2018) practical advice on 'how to use Max Weber's Ideal Type in sociological analysis'. Thus, this step proved essential in our methodological process of building a Weberian influenced typology. Finally, we have drawn on our own insider positionalities of living, working and researching in the UK's rural economy. These three elements combined have helped us construct and develop our Weberian influenced typology of farmers and their CICs.

| Farmers | Farm Businesses | Farm Business Strategies |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Traditionalist farmers | Farming as a lifestyle | No/reactive strategies |
| Hobbyist/part-time farmers | | Social entrepreneurship strategies |
| Constrained entrepreneurs | Farming as a business | Diversification/innovation based |
| farmers of entrepreneurs | | Diversification/innovation based |
| Farmers as businesspeople | | Growth/efficiency driven |

Table 2 Typology framework

Traditionalist Farmers

Traditionalist farmers are those typically older-aged farmers who might be considered change resisters: the only time this group considers altering their farm business strategies is if they are forced to do so. The traditionalist farmer is an expansion of McElwee's (2008a) 'farmer as farmer' type. These types of farmers are often very experienced and view themselves as successful, and they have usually acquired the farm through succession and now own the farm business with minimal liabilities. Traditionalist farmers have often benefited from the EU subsidies because they own large plots of land and they have reached a comfortable level of financial sustainability. BPS removal is of little importance to them as they soon will be retiring, and new policies are often viewed as a problem for the next generation. Interestingly, their view of business success is not always measured in monetary terms and they often also pursue non-economic goals; technology adoption is limited and business costs are largely unaccounted for (Gittins et al., 2020). Traditionalist farmers might be

viewed as largely unproductive, but their businesses often work well and allows them to pursue farming as a lifestyle choice (Pinto-Correia et al., 2015).

The traditionalist farmer is symbolic of many of older farmers in the UK , many of whom lack strategic thinking capabilities, have no formal farm business strategies, and generally lack core business and management skillsets. Diversification strategies are often avoided as these farmers want to construct farming identities that do not involve strong rural-urban integration (Lokier et al., 2021). Traditionalist farmers may also possess an external Locus of Control (LoC) and may typically pursue strategies that are risk-adverse and do not deviate away from core farm activities (Baldegger et al., 2017). Whilst there might be members of the farming family who have their own business goals and entrepreneurial ambitions within the business, traditionalist farmers often hold seniority, and they can therefore constrain entrepreneurial activities. Consequently, after finding it difficult to have their ideas accepted within the family, family members often leave the business and pursue careers outside of agriculture. Farm succession might be unplanned, with traditional farmers seeing little value in thinking about the long-term goals (Lobley, 2010). In this sense, Traditionalist farmers do not view the farm as a business, rather it is seen as a lifestyle choice that is often romanticized via links with the idyllic rural lifestyle with decisions underpinned by more traditional social action (Weber, 1978). This type of farmer is often very difficult to engage with and very often they don't want to take any steps to change the farming business. Perhaps the traditionalist farmer is how agricultural outsiders socially construct farmers, as (typically) older males who work very long hours in isolation for little financial reward. However, as the rest of our typology suggests, farmers are more heterogeneous than these assumptions suggest.

Entrepreneurially Orientated Farmers

The EO farmer type builds on McElwee's (2008a) typology, alongside incorporating McElwee and Smith's (2012) segmentation framework to help conceptualise how entrepreneurial farmers behave, reflecting on personal and business characteristics and associated activities and processes. Entrepreneurial farmers are typically younger in age in comparison to traditionalist farmers. They have taken risks to get to the position where they are and are proactive, seeking opportunities to innovate wherever possible (McElwee, 2006). Indeed, some research has shown that female farmers might be more entrepreneurial than male farmers (Morris et al., 2021; De Rosa et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial farmers might also be from non-farming backgrounds or have outsider experience, which can result in them undertaking more varied activities than traditionalist farmers (Pindado et al., 2018). EO farmers may use a variety of diversification and innovation-based strategies to generate income, displaying high levels of strategic thinking capabilities (Heracleous, 1998), being 'pulled' towards this strategic choice as opposed to being 'pushed' out of necessity and survival. They may also have high levels of technological skillsets, utilising farm

software and technology to support business goals (Gittins et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2022).

Family is critical in supporting farm entrepreneurship activities, utilising skillsets within the family alongside networks that extend beyond initial family and friend contacts to generate social capital (McElwee and Bosworth, 2010; Jervell, 2011; Arnott et al., 2021). As opposed to constraining ideas from the farm family, as traditionalist farmers might do, EO farmers might seek to create an environment that enables entrepreneurial learning. Entrepreneurial farmers will often display 'bricolage', creating value-added services from a limited resource base by 'making do with what is at hand' (Baker and Nelson, 2005: 329). Thus, allowing farmers to utilise entrepreneurial skillsets and innovation while operating in resource-constrained environments. Farm activities often span different spatial contexts (Müller and Korsgaard, 2018), with farmers remaining 'entrepreneurially alert' to new markets and opportunities to generate additional income and add value to the farm business (Kirzner, 1979). Farmers may engage in entrepreneurial strategies in response to the institutional constraints, including farm shop diversification rather than livestock growth strategies (Lokier et al., 2021). Interestingly, EO farmers are often no more financially successful than traditionalist farmers, primarily due to formal institutions (i.e., European grants and subsidies) favouring larger landowners.

Farmers as Businesspeople

Just as entrepreneurs and small business owners are differentiated in the literature, differences can also be drawn between farmers-as-entrepreneurs and farmers-as-businesspeople (Carland et al., 1984). The question 'are farmers businesspeople' has been raised by Couzy and Dockes (2008) in the context of French farming, the conclusion being that the modern-day farmer is becoming more business minded, utilising similar business and management skillsets to those evident in other industries. From a Weberian (1978) standpoint, these actions are extremely rational.

Unlike like the traditionalist farmer, the farmer as a businessperson does not view the farm as a lifestyle, nor do they identify themselves as being entrepreneurial, rather, the farm is viewed as an economic proposition. Business-minded farmers possess sufficient operational skillsets and understand that every farm process has a time and cost. However, in comparison to EO farmers, they are more risk adverse, and while they are more innovative than traditionalist farmers, their approach to farming is relatively homogenous in nature but done in a more cost-efficient manner. This type of farmer generally utilises their land to accommodate as much livestock or viable crop as possible to realise economies of scale. They have strong financial literacy that enables them to monitor and control business costs.

Business-minded farmers typically utilise technology and collect data on farming processes to enable them to make better informed livestock and grassland management decisions. They are process-orientated, drawing on support from actors outside of their initial family and friend networks to help them make the farm as efficient as possible. The farmer as a businessperson uses strategies that allow them to generate additional income, and emphasis is placed on appropriate livestock selection and breeding programmes, utilising data to achieve their business objectives.

Hobbyist and part-time farmers

Hobbyist and part-time farmers do not have their entire lives invested in the farm and tend to view farming more of a lifestyle choice than a business, similar to traditionalist farmers. They have entered farming, generally not through the route of succession, but because of their passion for agriculture, and they are often agricultural outsiders. Often, these farmers run smallholdings and other types of farming businesses, such as community farms and rural social enterprises. Hobbyist and part-time farmers exhibit copious amounts of entrepreneurial activity.

These farmers use farm business strategies centred around non-economic and even social entrepreneurship goals, orchestrating their farm business in non-conventional ways because of their own idyllic views of farming (Mingay, 2017). Farm practices might be orientated towards involving the community, as opposed to being tailored towards individual profit maximization. Farm business income is often supplemented with prior savings or through off-farm income. Whilst the activities associated with these farmer types may not be the most cost-effective and rational way of farming, activities often involve deeply symbolic and social elements, allowing farmers to become key figures in rural communities. Thus, many hobbyist and part-time farmers employ social entrepreneurship strategies.

In farming businesses, these social entrepreneurship practices are sometimes incorporated into the farming business in unconventional and informal ways, but not within a traditional sense of what social entrepreneurship is considered to be (Weerawardena and Mort, 2006). Indeed, formal rural farming social enterprises may be set up (i.e., a Community Interest Company), but many hobbyist and part-time farmers incorporate social entrepreneurship goals and activities within the existing farm enterprise. For example, some hobbyist farmers might opt for using more traditional methods of production, using vintage machinery that makes use of the local rural labour force. While this approach is not the most rational or particularly cost effective, it exhibits strong social contributions that helps farmers overcome some of the limitations associated with contemporary farming, such as rural isolation. These types of farmers underpin their farming strategies and decision-making with more traditional and emotive social action (Weber, 1978).

Environmentally Conscious Farmers

Environmentally conscious farmers are aware of how their farm businesses contribute towards achieving environmental sustainability. Often, this type of farmer will have a genuine interest in environmental sustainability and their farming practices will reflect this. These farmers acknowledge the environmental impacts of farming, recognising that there are measures (which are not always the most cost efficient) that can be taken to reduce the environmental impact of the farm. Environmental farmers are keenly aware of upcoming policy changes favouring environmental services and are proactive in orientating their farm businesses towards environmental goals. Indeed, this type of farmer may resemble the 'Good Farmer' ideal noted in the literature (Naylor et al., 2018), whereby good farmers are connected to the land. Environmental farmers are not pursuing environmentally orientated strategies primarily for-profit seeking reasons, rather they have a personal connection with the environment and want to farm in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Within this group, farm business strategies are centred around improving the local farming environment. For example, some farmers might seek to calculate their own environmental farm impacts through carbon calculations (AHDB, 2020). Moreover, the livestock system and management practices might be balanced with environmental objectives, such as planting trees and hedgerows around the boundaries of fields. Environmentally conscious farmers are generally more aware of ongoing policy shifts and tailor their businesses accordingly. Because of their personal environmental values, they think proactively about what environmental services they can produce and how they can future proof their businesses under initiatives such as ELMs. Activities undertaken by environmentally conscious farmers, such as organic modes of farming and an increased focus on shortened supply chains, could be a logical entrepreneurial choice as more farmers transition towards agricultural production orientated around sustainability.

Constrained Farm Entrepreneurs

Constrained entrepreneurs reflect those farmers who want to engage in farm entrepreneurship but have personal constraints that prevent them from doing so, including personal finance issues, limited skillsets, landlord relationships, rural resources and age (Refai and McElwee, 2022). Interestingly, much entrepreneurial activity can exist in family farming businesses, though more traditionalist farmers can constrain these ways of working, often resulting in members of the farm family seeking employment or self-employment outside of the business. Tenant farmers might be constrained by more powerful landlords, and diversification strategies may be halted due to opposing views around farm identities. Moreover, farmers might be

limited by locational, topographic and the rural infrastructure, which can prevent access to networks, abattoirs and livestock auctions, and the development of entrepreneurial strategies. EO farmers are constrained by a vast number of formal and informal institutional forces.

These constraints are often relative to individual circumstances, making support difficult, as not all farmers face the same challenges. However, if such constraints can be managed, then entrepreneurial activity can be encouraged and lead to economic, social and environmental contributions. Constrained farm entrepreneurs are no different to EO farmers, but they operate in an environment in which entrepreneurial activities cannot be actioned.

4.0 Examining Constrained Institutional Contexts

Our typology moves conceptualisations beyond ‘farmers as entrepreneurs’ but also highlights other types that draw attention to the heterogeneous nature of UK farmers. This typology is now explored through the proposed Weberian insights. We begin by discussing how farmers respond to CICs, discussing the typology in the context of the three types of CIC’s presented earlier. A new cage variant also emerges through our discussions of the institutional challenges facing farmers, taking into consideration contemporary society by incorporating an increased attention given to agri-environmental sustainability.

The Restrictive Cage

Farmers that reside in the restrictive cage are constrained by various formal and informal institutions. This is similar to Weber’s ICR. Mann (2018) suggests that industries that receive high levels of government support are subjected to higher levels of bureaucracy, regulation and control. Indeed, many traditionalist farmers perceive bureaucracies or ‘red tape’ (i.e., administrative tasks, dealing with public authorities etc.) to be particularly constraining.

Bureaucracy is challenging for the more traditionalist farmers and some [traditionalist] farmers have been fined for non-compliance with the terms of agri-environmental schemes (Dobbs and Pretty, 2008). For the more traditionally orientated farmers, the increasing bureaucracies associated with modern farming have almost become too constraining to business activities. Power relationships and domination are particularly prominent between farming and non-farming actors. Traditionalist farmers argue that profitability can be enhanced if the UK government reduces interference and regulation, and they often possess a disregard for authoritative forms of control. Moreover, many traditionalist farmers argue that those working for Defra and other government bodies do not (and cannot) comprehend the

practical realities associated with farming, which draws attention to and emphasises the rural-urban divide phenomenon (Tacoli, 1998).

In many cases, traditionalist type farmers are the source of constraints in family businesses. Traditionalists hold seniority in farming enterprises, often refusing to give power to other actors, thus creating 'constrained entrepreneurs'. The ageing work force issue appears to exacerbate this problem, for as farm children get older they often want more authority and input, but traditionalist farmers are often reluctant to transfer authority and empower them. Tenant farmers are particularly constrained.

In *Economy and Society*, Weber (1978: 53) defines 'power as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance'. Power is a theme routed deeply in many of the challenges facing farmers. Succession and working with family are a key challenge for many farmers. Farm children often strive for legitimation and to be taken seriously, and they aspire to be given more authority handling finances, buying and selling livestock, engaging in diversification strategies and ultimately gaining more control of the farm. Yet, traditionalist farmers have difficulty in transferring this power, which often leads to conflict amongst the rest of the farming family. When the traditionalist farmer is succeeded and children gain legitimate control of the enterprise, they will often be older and less entrepreneurial in nature, as entrepreneurial orientation arguably declines with age (Liang et al., 2018). Business minded and EO farmers take progressive steps towards a healthy farm succession.

Thus, the iron cage metaphor provides a useful way of exploring how some formal (i.e., policy change, government restrictions) and informal (i.e., landlord, family relationships) institutional conditions prevent farmers from pursuing certain business activities and constrain entrepreneurial action. Farmers residing inside iron cages face different limitations. Traditionalist farmers, for example, will use reactive/ do nothing farm business strategies and only change when forced to (i.e., initiate survival strategies), or when policy measures, support change.

The Protective Cage

The main distinctive feature of this cage variant is that the cage is privileging and protective in nature and favours certain individuals. Formal institutional conditions have historically favoured large landowners and caused challenges for tenant farmers (Ilbery et al., 2007; Maye et al., 2009; Arnott et al., 2019). Some farmers criticise the financial positioning of large landowners as "armchair farmers born into a state of luxury" (Gittins, 2022:306). Indeed, income differences between large landowners and struggling farmers is one reason why UK government is moving away from subsidy support based on land ownership (Defra, 2021). Naturally, this subsidy support set up favours larger farms, especially those farmers who have inherited the farm business

via succession with minimal liabilities. Traditionalist farmers have a cushion of support whereby there is little incentive to pursue riskier entrepreneurial strategies, as financial success is not difficult to achieve due to the lucrative position and 'state of luxury' that they inhabit.

The velvet cage is a product of the institutional conditions created by EU policymakers. Naturally, all policies in some way will favour some and disadvantage others. However, it may be argued that as agricultural, rural and environmental policy transformations occur, a new velvet cage will be formed. The UK DAP is centred around the idea of 'public money for public goods', which incentivises farmers for providing services that the public can benefit from i.e., countryside access, sustainable farming practices and increasing biodiversity (Defra, 2021). With this shift in policy arguably comes a shift in power: those farmers who are rich in natural capital and ecological knowledge (Spake et al., 2019), will be in a better position to monetise their farming methods and align them with the requirements of the ELMs. Thus, a new velvet cage is being created which is to replace the prior one which rewarded landownership.

These transformations resonate with the classical economic and entrepreneurship theory associated with Schumpeter's 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter et al., 1934). As policies change and new policies are introduced, old ones are destroyed, creating new institutional conditions in which entrepreneurs must navigate and respond to. However, with the formation of a DAP, it is expected that many farmers might be unprepared and lack sufficient knowledge to adapt to the changing policy mechanisms, which risks turning the previously velvet cage into an iron cage for some farmers.

Traditionalist farmers reside inside these velvet cages, protected by institutional conditions and not facing the same realities as tenant and small-scale farmers, who have been subjected to inflated land prices, lack of subsidy income, and hence an inability to reach economies of scale (Maye et al., 2009). However, as policies change, farmers will be forced to consider new business strategies to comply with the ELMs, for example. Thus, the CIC is shifting with a new protective cage that rewards pro-environmental farming, with the previously protective subsidy cage transitioning into an iron cage. Farmers will need to evaluate their strategic choices to maintain economic sustainability ahead of these transformations. Actors within iron cages must now formulate cage exit strategies, preferably towards the 'new' environmental velvet cage that is emerging, or they may face increasing restrictions and even business failure. A continued reactive and do-nothing strategic approach may lead to business failure for some traditionalist farmers in accordance with agricultural and environmental policy transformation, prompting some farmers to engage in survival strategies (Meert et al., 2005). If farmers do not pursue new [entrepreneurial] strategies once subsidies are removed, farm businesses could be 'destroyed' to make way for a

new wave of environmentally friendly policies and EO farmers that are self-sufficient and detached from BPS support (Schumpeter et al., 1934). Perhaps this is needed to meet agri-environmental goals and encourage entrepreneurship within the sector? However, it remains to be seen how a decline in traditionalist farmers and an increase in other farmer types will change rural landscapes.

Many questions remain as to whether and how farmers will adapt, willingly or not, to increasing demands for environmental sustainability, and to extent policy will facilitate entrepreneurship and innovation in the sector. As the typology shows, some farmers are genuinely interested in pursuing environmental objectives, while others are less inclined to change. However, it seems clear that if farmers want to remain profitable under ELMs, farm businesses need to be more orientated towards supporting environmental initiatives. This discussion pivots back to an earlier debate as to whether 'Iron' is the right cage metaphor? Bamboo is a good candidate. It is strong and grows at an incredible rate compared to other forms of wood, and it is increasingly used in 'sustainable' products. For traditionalist farmers, the bamboo cage is growing quickly around them and forcing them to move away from old institutional conditions, yet they might perceive it as a prison like structure (Klagge, 1997). In accordance with every action being calculated to the highest degree of efficiency to optimize profit, farmers must now measure the environmental impacts of their activities. More traditionalist farmers might view this as constraining and another feature of the iron cage, which adds more pressure to the already complex world of farming, forcing them to either to adapt, do nothing, and perhaps leave the sector.

For environmentally conscious farmers, the bamboo cage is a welcome development as many are already pursuing sustainable practices for little reward, yet their approaches are now likely to be financially rewarded. Business leaders are increasingly pressured to become 'carbon literate', with some farmers now engaging in carbon capture to understand the environmental impacts of their practices in their journey towards net-zero farming (AHDB, 2022). Certainly, environmentally conscious farmers will likely welcome these policy transformations that promote environmental farm sustainability. However, it remains to be seen how different farmer types that are not environmentally conscious adapt to increasing demands for environmental sustainability and the new 'rules of the game' inside this emerging cage (Chowdhury et al., 2019).

The Cage is Neutral

In the third alteration the cage is viewed in a more neutral light informed by Klagge (1997) and Ritzer's (2009) work. This variant shows how it can be advantageous and disadvantageous to those within it, suggesting that the rural institutional context presents both opportunities and constraints for its actors (Stathopoulou et al., 2004:).

Bureaucracy, regulation and increasing rationalization, while certainly having some negative connotations, are accepted and also valued by some actors. Although metallic (i.e., iron, steel) in nature, some who choose to closely inspect the bars of this cage (i.e., analyse the formal and informal institutional barriers) realise that they are in fact made of rubber and flexible, and that this allows some EO individuals to escape their CIC's (Refai and McElwee, 2022).

Entrepreneurship thus offers potential opportunities for individuals who are willing to analyse CIC's and think about ways to escape, for example, by considering diversification strategies to support farm business income as subsidy payments are phased out. Individuals residing within this cage might have an internal LoC (Lefcourt, 1991). An internal LoC is prominent in individuals who believe constraints are a matter of mindset that can be overcome with enough determination and resources (Lefcourt, 1991), in other words, with an entrepreneurial mind-set farmers can choose to escape increasing rationalization, the nature of the cage thus being relative to how one views it. Those who possess the entrepreneurial skills and competencies to respond can overcome the constraints, whilst those who cannot become further constrained. However, for farmers to economically prosper we argue it is more than a matter of mindset, a conducive and enabling rural environment needs to be created to support effective [farm] entrepreneurship strategies (Kuyvenhoven, 2004; De Rosa et al., 2022). Policy support is needed to create this conducive environment.

Kallioniemi et al. (2011) note that bureaucracy is a challenge to farmers. Older (traditionalist) farmers, in particular, may perceive bureaucracy in a constraining manner, due to lack of farmer skillsets. Younger and more entrepreneurial farmers view bureaucracies in a different light, they argue, as rubber cages that can be escaped from. For example, some viewed the 'red tape' as essential to modern farming, allowing farmers to produce high quality British beef and lamb products with high levels of animal and environmental standards. While some farmers voiced frustrations of having to comply with schemes such as Red Tractor, they realised that compliance not only allowed them to sell their products at a higher price than other farmers, but also had wider social and environmental significance. Younger farmers generally viewed older traditionalist farmers as lacking the skills, knowledge and capabilities to comply with the rules and regulations associated with modern farming, which in turn caused them to feel stressed and incur financial costs, thus reinforcing the iron cage. Those farmers who are more entrepreneurially orientated in nature would pursue different strategic options to other farmer types, such as farm diversification (McElwee, 2008a). These strategies allow them to overcome the institutional constraints that are facing other farmers in the industry, thereby offering relative immunity to constraints of the cage. The conceptualisation of the fluid, liquid and rubber cage variants are important, as they allow scholars to look at how individuals (i.e., farmers, refugees etc.) can overcome institutional constraints.

5.0 Responding to the Constrained Institutional Environment

This paper set out to answer the question: What can we learn about constrained entrepreneurship in UK agriculture using a Weberian lens? The answer to this question is complex. Applying Weber's iron cage forms only part of the analysis and provides a pessimistic view into viewing farmer responses to the institutional challenges. For some farmers, the CIC's is symbolic of Weber's iron cage, but the institutional environment can also be conceptualised by incorporating the work of the other cage adaptations in the literature, such as the rubber, glass, fluid, neutral and, now, the bamboo cage of sustainability (Klagge, 1997; Briscoe, 2007; Ritzer, 2011; Weber, 2015; Ritzer et al., 2018; Refai and McElwee, 2022). These cage variants have been useful in theorizing and analysing the CIC's that farmers operate within. Weber's cage can be interpreted as cynical, restricting actors in their daily lives. Other interpretations frame the cage in a more positive and beneficial manner, with farmers being able to reap the benefits of bureaucracy. It is also possible to view the cage as neutral in nature, recognising that within institutional contexts actors can navigate towards both negative and positive outcomes

Whether the cage is velvet, a *Stahlhartes Gehäuse* or bamboo, actors are still bounded by the institutional conditions that govern them. This paper has sought to understand better the institutional conditions that constrain farm entrepreneurship. Utilising a strong theoretical underpinning, we have illustrated how shifting agricultural, rural and environmental policies are altering the CIC's impacting farmers. Indeed, the velvet cage protecting wealthy landowners is now becoming iron, with a new bamboo cage being formed to welcome those farmers who are rich in natural capital and constraining those who lack ecological knowledge.

The iron cage metaphor, and the various adaptations, have proven useful in exploring the heterogeneous nature of farmers in responding to the institutional challenges they face. The heterogeneity of farming businesses is often poorly acknowledged in the literature and our discussion has helped rethink the ideal types highlighted earlier in relations to CICs (summarised in Table 1). Analysing the different institutional scenarios has provided insight into the relative challenges facing farmers, thus aiding understanding of the types of business strategies used to respond to industry challenges. Weber advocated that power and domination resulted from the interactions between two groups: Rulers and the ruled. In this paper, we have largely discussed the 'ruled', yet scholars should also examine the 'rulers' who create and shape the institutional environment: policymakers, landlords, primary decision-makers.

Policymakers might seek to examine further the effects of increasing rationalization in the agricultural sector and the extent to which an increased drive for sustainable farming might impact the realities facing farmers. Indeed, Weber argued that

rationalization and increasing bureaucratic control is a part of modern life which is inescapable. In his work on social action in particular, Weber notes how rational social action is replacing other types of social action. Our work has demonstrated that the more EO farmers tend to run their farm businesses in extremely rational ways, drawing upon their [entrepreneurial] skillsets to minimise business costs and maximise profits, while many traditionally oriented and hobbyist farmers possess non-economic farming goals resembling Weber's other types of social action (i.e., traditional and affectual). While promoting further rationalization and entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector might be beneficial from an economic standpoint, it might have negative environmental and social connotations. For example, increasing productivity or transitioning farming activities away from livestock management (i.e., labour intensive activities), while proposing economic and environmental benefits, may serve to reduce farm labour and increase rural isolation.

We have engaged in what Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) term 'ordering theory' through the creation of Weberian influenced ideal types. Conceptually, pure ideal types of farmers, farm businesses and their strategies were formulated, thus building on the lack of strong theoretical underpinnings found within rural studies and farm entrepreneurship research (Suess-Reyes and Fuetsch, 2016). Our nuanced understanding of cage variants promotes understanding of how institutional conditions influenced strategic choices and behaviours of farmers. In applying Weber's iron cage to examine constrained entrepreneurship, a theoretical contribution to the farm entrepreneurship and rural sociology literature has been made. Furthermore, our work builds on existing typologies in the farm entrepreneurship literature (McElwee, 2008a) to provide further conceptualizations of farmers and creates ideal type farm businesses and farm business strategies. Our theoretical contribution can also be regarded as what Sandberg and Alvesson (2021) regard as 'comprehending theory', an approach to theory development that is common in the interpretative tradition. By drawing on our own research and experiences in rural contexts, we have explored the relative and multiple realities of farmers, understanding through *verstehen* how they perceive CIC's and the extent in which farm entrepreneurship is facilitated and constrained.

Finally, we have also created our own cage adaptation to complement the existing literature, the bamboo cage of sustainability. It remains to be seen how the push for environmentalism and sustainability will form a new velvet cage or perhaps a bamboo prison for some farmers. Not only is increasing rationalization present within the industry, prompting farmers to strive for economic efficiency to sustain [farm] business performance (at a cost of reducing farm labour), new actions are calculating the environmental outputs of farming businesses. In a global context, New Zealand plans to tax farmers for the amount of methane emissions produced from livestock farming (Hoskins, 2022), yet it is unknown whether other countries (including the UK) will adopt similar approaches in their journey towards achieving net-zero agriculture

and stopping climate change. Finally, as all industries are adapting to the increasing environmental impacts associated with climate change, the bamboo cage imagery could be developed and extended further into other agricultural sub-contexts, and also outside agriculture. We conclude that farmers should observe the institutional environment more carefully if they are to future proof their businesses and respond to increasing demands for environmental (and not just business) sustainability.

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