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# How Farmers Disentangle from Convention and Develop Social and Ecological Objectives in Lincolnshire, UK

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The ecological and social impacts of conventional farming have prompted European policy initiatives to regulate and encourage farming practices. Yet, the ways in which farmers develop their own ecological and social practices are not well understood. Building on practice theory, this study advances a new framework to examine how some conventional farmers develop social and ecological objectives. Employing this framework in Lincolnshire, England revealed three common pathways for the development of new practices. These pathways were modelled to visualize how farming practices transform gradually and cyclically. The model depicts how some farmers disentangle from convention and engage in new objectives on their own terms.

Keywords: regional food systems, entanglement, practice theory.

## Introduction

This study examines how farmers change their routines in Lincolnshire, a region where industrial farming practices are conventional (Business Lincolnshire, 2023). The negative environmental and social impacts of such practices have inspired political interventions (Pe'er et al., 2020; Greenpeace Nederland, 2022). Such initiatives, however, are notoriously difficult to implement and contentious to debate (Boztas, 2022; Pronczuk and Moses, 2023). A clearer understanding for how farmers change practices might inform strategies for approaching this sensitive issue. Examining how farmers develop their own social and ecological objectives can inform more effective policy. This study builds on frameworks of practice theory components, and notions of dis/entanglement and dis/engagement, to model how farmers develop social and ecological practices.

## Theoretical Background

Practice theory is a body of social theory that examines routinized human behavior as a focus for understanding why and how people do things. Researchers have used practice theory to explain how behavior can both persist and change through recursion. The theorist Anthony Giddens (1984) popularized this recursive nature of practices, as practices are “continually recreated” by the practioners themselves (Giddens, 1984). Schatzki’s (1996) three components of practices highlight the fundamental elements that make up practices. The components include:

“(1) ... understandings, for example, of what to say and do; (2) ... explicit rules, principles, precepts and instructions; and (3) ... what I will call ‘teleoaffective’ structures embracing ends, projects, tasks, purposes, beliefs, emotions and moods (Schatzki, 1996, p. 89).”

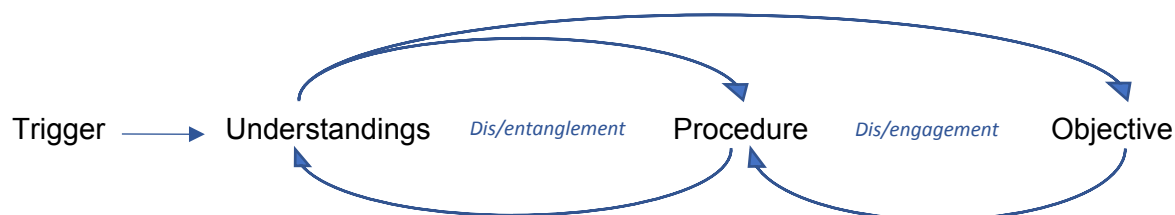
These three components are sometimes simplified as *understandings*, *procedures*, and *objectives* (Warde 2005). These are the terms used in this paper.

When a practice is reproduced, it is not always perfect. Each time a practice is performed, its components are subject to some modification. Warde (2005) cites such imperfect recreations as a way in which practices transform. The “sources of changed behaviour lie in the development of practices themselves (Warde 2005).”

Such modification in a practice’s components may result in the slow adoption of an entirely new set of practices. As a practitioner reduces their adherence to an established protocol, they often simultaneously adopt another. This incremental process can occur unintentionally and without an actor’s complete awareness. The cultural critic Sarah Nuttal (2009) describes this process as an ‘entanglement.’ Practitioners are “twisted together or entwined” with protocols that can encourage new practices or perspectives to emerge. Those experiencing

this change, unbeknownst, usually retain their old goals and objectives. Therefore, when farmers describe modifying their understandings and procedures, while keeping established objectives, we refer to this as ‘dis/entanglement’. Dis/entanglement reflects the often less-than-intentional process for which practitioners stop following some procedures, while adopting others, in pursuit of *established goals*. On the other hand, when farmers describe intentionally adopting new objectives, we refer to this as ‘dis/engagement’. These producers deliberately disengage from established procedures, while engaging in others, in pursuit of *new goals*.

Some farmers dis/entangle from practices without dis/engaging from them. Some dis/engage without dis/entangling. Yet others cycle between the two. These pathways are visualized in figure 1.



[fig.1] The Dis/entanglement and Dis/engagement model. The dis/entanglement and dis/engagement model consists of several pathways in which farmers move away from established practices and toward a new set of practices. For many, practices start to modify in response to a trigger. Such a trigger induces a practitioner to reexamine their established understandings of a practice. This shift is illustrated with the first blue arrow on the left. A practitioner might then begin to disentangle from their routine by adjusting a procedure, the middle blue arrow from the top. Adhering to a new procedure has the propensity to reveal a new perspective and further entangle a practitioner in a new understanding, the bottom left arrow. This new perspective can then advance a deliberate engagement in new objectives, shown by the top arrow. An engagement in new objectives often leads to an engagement in new procedures, the bottom right arrow. The experience of shifting away from previous routines and embracing new practices can be seen as a cyclical process of dis/entanglement and dis/engagement.

Paired with insight on practice components, dis/entanglement and dis/engagement can serve as a framework to analyze how farmers’ practices change. This framework can help show how a farmer’s understandings and procedures dis/entangle them from/in routines, as well as how understandings and objectives dis/engage them from/in practices. This can help reveal how farmers stumble upon and purposefully embrace changes in practices.

## Methodology

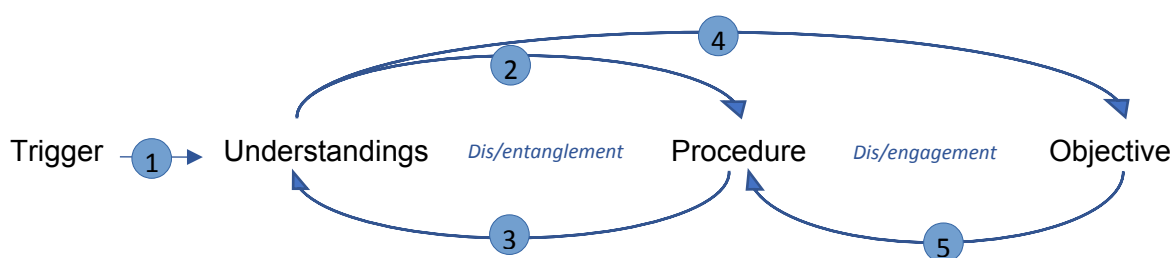
To conduct this study, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and inductive data analysis. Farmers were identified through Google searches and recommendations from other farmers interviewed. The lead author immersed himself in Lincolnshire farming networks and volunteered daily on a Lincolnshire dairy farm in Spring 2023. This experience informed the interview schedule, supported participant observations, and helped identify additional food system actors to engage with. Interview questions focused on the process in which farmers’ practices shifted over the span of their careers. Recordings of these interviews were coded for practice components described above. This analysis helped reveal cycles of dis/entanglement and dis/engagement in the farmers’ narratives. Pseudonyms were given to the farmers in the study.

## Results

Farmers’ experience of change followed three general trends we refer to as pathways. These pathways show ways in which farming practices change and transform. Some farmers experienced both dis/entanglement and dis/engagement, while others experienced just one or the other.

### Pathway 1 – Dis/entanglement and Dis/engagement

Two farmers in the study expressed undergoing dis/entanglement followed by dis/engagement. The two share similar backgrounds. Geoffrey and Sam both grew up on mid-size 300-500 acre conventional dairy farms. Unfortunately, their inherited farms struggled to profit from sales to conventional, commodity buyers. These financial struggles triggered a shift in the farmers' understandings about marketing. Instead of following their parents and expanding production for the global market, Geoffrey and Sam began exploring new customer bases. These farmers found that branding and certifying their products could give them access to premium markets. Premium markets required adopting new, organic procedures, and linking to regional value chains and customers. As they entangled in new marketing and environmental practices, they began to develop an appreciation for the impact of embedding their business in their regional economies and ecology. They discovered that "social and environmental sustainability are very, very closely linked." Every link in the regional value chain, including the environment, has "got to be nurtured" for all participants to succeed. This appreciation then led to a process of 'dis/engagement' as farmers purposefully shifted their farms away from a profit-mostly orientation towards ecological and social objectives. Geoffrey organized a regional wheat-bread value chain with a local miller, baker, and chef that prioritized environmentally resilient varieties and prices that supported all actors. Sam developed a vegetable box delivery company specializing in organic and environmental shipping practices.



[fig. 2] Sam's Dis/entanglement and Dis/engagement Model. In step 1, Sam recognized that continuing to produce for conventional commodity markets would mean overwhelming competition and decreasing margins. This triggered him to consider other marketing strategies. In step 2, he disentangled from conventional markets and entangled in the organic market. This coincided with an entanglement in organic practices. Sam "got off the tractor," connected physically with the soil, and relinquished chemical control over production. In step 3, Sam followed a change in these procedures with a shift in his understanding about the value of ecology and social sustainability for his success. In step 4, Sam engaged in new objectives to benefit the environment and his coworkers. In step 5, Sam embraced new procedures such as supporting biodiversity and soil health. He also gave employees ownership and democratic control over the company's operations and decisions. After leaving his company, he started a cooperative farm intended to serve a local and regional economy.

### Pathway 2 – Dis/engagement

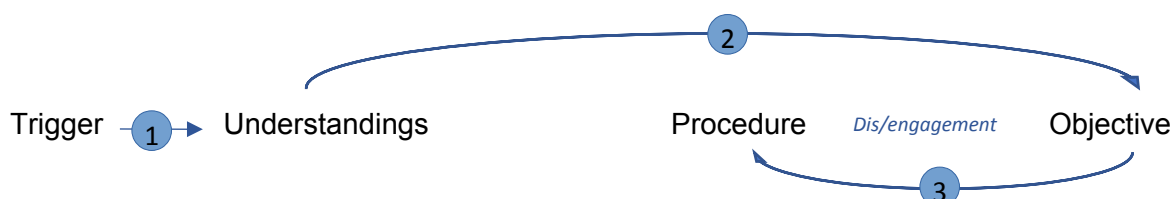
Other farmers described engaging with new objectives without entangling first. Once these farmers developed new understandings, they engaged immediately in new environmental and/or social objectives. These objectives then led to new procedures. For these farmers, unlike for Geoffrey and Sam, the broader impact of new practices were a major reason for adoption. Geoffrey and Sam had to entangle with their new practices first, before they could appreciate their socio-ecological impact.

Elena, for example, described shifting her farming objectives away from her father's focus on increasing scale and efficiency. She wanted to involve her farm in her community and in education. Elena began organizing workshops for kids to visit her 500 acre mixed arable and

animal farm (fig. 3). She also engaged in new marketing procedures. Elena started a local box delivery scheme to increase sales to local customers. She uses less chemicals for the production of this produce and earns more than she would otherwise from conventional markets. Still, a large majority of her farm's produce continues to be sold to conventional commodity markets.

Another farmer, Wilson, also described changing practices by embracing new objectives. An encounter with a regenerative farmer triggered him to consider working with nature, instead of "against it." He adopted 'conservation agriculture' on his 700 acre arable farm. With this, Wilson developed a new objective to engage with natural ecological processes as much as possible. He began prioritizing natural fertilization with climate-adapted, resilient varieties even if that would reduce his yields. By saving on input costs, he would continue to earn a profit anyway. While he adopted many environmental practices, Wilson did not transition to organic cultivation. He terminated each crop in his rotation with chemical herbicide to make way for the next crop. Wilson did not connect his farm with the local economy or community, either. He continued selling to conventional buyers working within global commodity markets.

Kevin, a mixed arable farmer, was encouraged to adopt new objectives after a shift in his perspective, as well. Kevin's age, health, and work experience encouraged a shift in his understanding about intensive conventional farming. He wanted to disengage from its stressful practices. This inspired a new objective to farm on a smaller scale (200 acres) and with less inputs/work. He would do this by engaging in natural ecological processes and new financing schemes. He adopted new procedures to follow the UK government's Environmental Stewardship program offering payments for reduced use of harmful chemicals. Meanwhile, his children returned to the farm and started new local businesses. Kevin's daughter opened a bakery sourcing its wheat from the farm.



[fig. 3] Elena's Dis/engagement Model. In step 1, Elena is triggered to explore new ways of farming and marketing after witnessing her father's trying approaches to both. In step 2, she engaged in new objectives for the farm to cater to her community and not just the conventional market. In step 3 she developed new procedures of direct marketing to a local economy and educational programming on the farm.

### Pathway 3 - Dis/entanglement

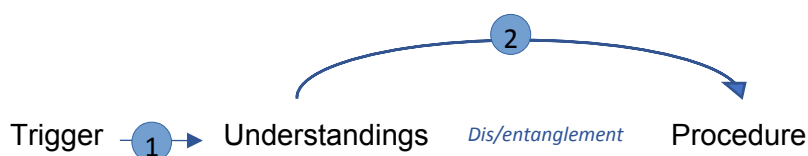
Other farmers entangled in new procedures without engaging in new objectives. Like the others in this study, these farmers were first triggered to shift their understandings about a conventional practice. Afterwards they entangled in new procedures in response. Unlike the other farmers, however, they would not go on to embrace new objectives. These farmers believed that new social or environmental objectives would oppose their current goals for increasing yield and profit. So these farmers could not make any big changes, however reluctantly they were about it.

Jack and his family were triggered to consider 'regenerative' arable farming practices to reduce large operating costs. These farmers stopped tilling their soil and entangled in new 'no till' agricultural and business routines. These new procedures helped these farmers achieve established objectives for increasing yields and profits. Unlike Wilson, in Pathway 2, they did not embrace new objectives like a reduction in yield. Unlike the organic farmers in Pathway 1, they did not meaningfully engage in new environmental objectives, either. Jack and his family continued to heavily use herbicides. Continuing these practices and objectives

may have prevented subsequent/radical shifts in understandings, like Geoffrey and Sam had experienced that led to their new approaches to farming.

Hank also disentangled from conventional agriculture practices by reducing tillage on his arable farm (fig. 4). However, unlike Jack, Hank expressed an appreciation for environmental resilience on his arable farm. This appreciation did not translate into a new objective, however. A focus on resilience could reduce yields which would prevent him from reaching his financial objectives. After all, not every farmer can “afford to be principled” as “a lot of farmers are tied to the treadmill... of having to produce and having to pay the bills.” Sacrificing yields presented an unacceptable financial risk and presented “an unfortunate side effect that principles can be sacrificed.”

Dave also entangled in new procedures without engaging in new objectives. Dave was triggered to increase his production after receiving an offer from a new buyer. This led him to triple the size of his potato farming operation to 7500 acres, resulting in new procedures. Some of these procedures were inspired by new understandings about the role that “birds and the bees” play in increasing production. Dave added new crops in his rotation and reserved areas for wildlife to improve natural soil fertility and pollination. Yet, just like the other two farmers in Pathway 3, Dave did not want to reduce his yields. He did not want to completely eliminate chemical input use or go organic. He did not undergo a resulting change in understandings or objectives. Dave continued to primarily raise profits by increasing production to conventional markets.



[fig. 4] Hank’s Dis/entanglement Model. In step 1, Hank developed new understandings about the ecological benefits of reducing tillage on his farm. In step 2, this resulted in disentangling from tillage routines and entangling in new procedures like limiting cultivation and adding biodiversity. In step 3, Hank described developing an understanding for the ecological resilience on his farm. Yet, unlike some other farmers, he did not feel capable to fully engage in new objectives for resilience due to the financial risks of lower yields.

### No change

The only farmers interviewed who did not experience a significant change in practices were the Franks. This father and son duo working on 3000 acres of arable crops did not express any trigger to shift their understandings. Nor did they express any process of dis/entangling or dis/engaging. They experienced struggles to remain viable, but they did not reevaluate their perspective on how to finance their business. Their understandings remained the same: “Our prices are governed by market forces generally, world market forces.” So they continued their farming practices as is.

### Discussion

These three pathways represent three common trends in which farmers in this study changed practices. Each of these pathways are associated with a different degree of engagement in regional and ecological food systems. Farmers in the first pathway engaged their farms almost entirely in regional value chains and organic practices. Most farmers in the second pathway engaged a fraction of their production in regional value chains and low chemical input regimes. Farmers in the third pathway entangled in new environmental practices but did not engage in regional value chains nor regimes of low chemical input use.

These divergences can be attributed to the degree to which financial and socio-ecological objectives were perceived as dependent and mutually reinforcing. Farmers in Pathway 1, entangled in regional value chains and rigorous organic practices to increase profits, at first.

By the time they began engaging in socio-ecological objectives, a large part of their farm and business already depended on regional economies and ecological practices for financial survival. These farmers therefore viewed financial objectives and viability as mutually supportive of their socio-ecological objectives. Farmers who experienced the second pathway of transformation did not entangle first in regional value chains or organic practices. When they engaged in socio-ecological objectives, their farms did not depend on these factors to succeed. Regional value chains and ecological practices were perceived as nice values to embrace but not necessary for viability. Consequently, regional and low input produce represented a relatively small portion of their production. Farmers in the third category actively viewed ecological practices, and to some degree regional value chains, as opposing their financial objectives. Their farms depended on increasing production which could be threatened by low chemical input regimes. Therefore these farmers felt that they could not fully engage in socio-ecological objectives.

The farmers in the first category developed profitable farms with lower rates of production and chemical input use than they had had previously. These farmers managed this by embracing higher value markets and selling more directly to customers. Many of the farmers in the second category also embraced these marketing tactics. Farmers in the third category felt that they could not reduce their production, however. These farmers expressed skepticism for the organic market and felt that the size of their farm was too large to engage in regional value chains or direct sales. Therefore to support socio-ecological farming movements and practices, policymakers and planners can support regional value chains and high value markets that incentivize low chemical input use for small and mid-size farmers.

## Conclusion

The framework and model advanced by this study are useful tools for uncovering the process in which farming practices change. Examining how experiences shape and shift practice components provides a systematic method to study practice transformation. This study revealed three general pathways in which conventional farmers developed social and ecological objectives for their farms. The farmers who engaged the most in socio-ecological objectives were those that entangled in regional value chains and organic practices for financial reasons before engaging with them more intentionally. These farmers perceived financial objectives and socio-ecological objectives as mutually reinforcing. Therefore, to encourage socio-ecological food movements, policymakers and planners can support high value markets and regional value chains that incentivize organic and low chemical input use practices.

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