



# Diversifying Professional Identities in Dutch Organic Farming

An exploration of the role of non-agrarian work experience  
and blended professional identities on family farms

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# **A study on blending mechanisms in relation to professional identities in Dutch organic family farming**

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## Abstract

Due to multiple environmental challenges, the future of farming in the Netherlands is a highly discussed topic. Farmers protests across the country highlight how specific farm development trajectories are colliding with farmers' perceptions on their profession of farming. However, the Dutch farming community is highly differentiated, and speaking of one universally valid so-called agrarian professional identity therefore does not do justice to the complex reality. Hence this research explores to which degree diversifying professional identities also take shape within the Dutch organic sector itself. In order to grasp diversifying professional identities on Dutch organic family farms and understand its impact on farm orientations, this research makes use of a theoretical approach that includes both the role of non-agrarian work experience and blended professional identities. Since the existing literature on (blended) professional identities in organic farming is limited, this research has a strong explorative character. This research distinguishes two blending mechanisms, namely those that manifest itself over time in relation to non-agrarian work experience, and as the outcome of the interaction between partners. In-depth interviews with both female and male organic farmers reveal key differences and hence support the notion of diversifying professional identities in the organic sector. This diversification can be partially attributed to blending mechanisms of professional identities. Since this thesis also shows that the concept of blended professional identities is highly complex and fuzzy, further research on the notion of blended professional identities in agrarian studies is therefore recommended.

**Key words:** *Dutch organic farming, professional identities, non-agrarian work experience, blended identities, family farming, farm development trajectories*

## Preface

This thesis report forms the final piece of my 2-year master's program Organic Agriculture at Wageningen University & Research. During my studies, I became more and more interested in the Dutch agricultural sector, with all its challenges and opportunities for the future. Combined with the travel restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/2021, the idea of conducting thesis research abroad gradually shifted to the background.

Growing up in a relatively small village on the countryside, online and offline expressions considering the farmer protests did not pass me by. The protests – and the way in which farmers protested – evoked mixed reactions and raised questions. Compelling quotes that were used in this period, such as 'proud of the farmer' (or in Dutch: *trots op de boer*) made me think about the scope of being a farmer and agrarian identity. How is it possible to speak of "the" farmer, capturing all of them in one identity? The agricultural sector knows lots of variation, not in the last place in terms of farming styles. In my opinion, farmers with different perspectives regarding the farmer protests remained underexposed in the media, especially organic farmers. Yet assuming that all organic farmers have a homogeneous agrarian identity and share the same perspective on the future of agriculture is a pitfall.

All these reflections gave rise to the subject of my thesis: diversifying professional identities in the organic sector. I would like to specifically thank my supervisor Henk Oostindië, whose idea it was to research the concept of (blended) professional identities. Although the theory is relatively unfamiliar in agrarian studies, his uncurbed enthusiasm from the beginning onwards guided me throughout the entire process. The online conversations and critical but fair remarks were incredibly helpful. It all made the process more educational; the knowledge and skills I gained will never be lost.

I could not have successfully finished this research without the continuous support of my beloved friends and family. I have specifically appreciated their concerns and moral help during the difficulties that came with writing a thesis in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. Special thanks go to my sister, for her commitment and time spent on proofreading this report.

I would also like to express my gratitude to publisher Agrio for the access I received to many contacts of their survey. It drastically sped up the process of finding appropriate interviewees. Last, but not least, I would like to thank all interviewees for sparing me their valuable time. Without them, this thesis would not have been possible.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

Lisa Ligtermoet,  
Wageningen

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Research topic & research problem

### Farmer's upheaval: clash between the need for sustainability & agrarian identity

The future of farming in the Netherlands is a highly discussed topic. In consideration of environmental problems caused by intensive agriculture, the last decades have witnessed a vast increase in the attention for more sustainable pathways of farming (Poore & Nemecek, 2018). One of the diverse environmental problems of modern agriculture that receives much attention recently is the nitrogen surplus (de Vries et al., 2011). This surplus mainly originates from agricultural related practices, with feed concentrates and artificial fertilizer as the two major sources of nitrogen (CBS, 2020a). Therefore, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality devised a plan to limit the amount of nitrogen precipitation on protected natural areas (Rijksoverheid, unknown). This plan focuses both on subsidy schemes for livestock farmers to stimulate business termination, and on the adaptation of animal feed composition.

However, preliminary policy proposals to counter the nitrogen surplus have led - and still lead - to tensions among the farming community. Many consider these new policies as curtailing, and ways of "farmer bashing" (van der Ploeg, 2020). In October 2019, the social discontent among the farming community reached its peak, which resulted in large-scale farmers protests across the country (AD, 2019). Occupying highways with tractors, blocking distribution centers and threatening politicians were part of these protests. Farmers were angry and deeply frustrated about the new policies and felt both attacked and restricted in practicing their profession: farming. Outcomes of surveys among farmers highlight that farmers feel more and more pressured, despite their profession being widely respected (Trouw, 2018; van der Ploeg, 2020). The proposed measures that should make the agricultural sector more sustainable and should limit environmental degradation are thus colliding with farmers' perceptions on farming.

Indeed, van der Ploeg (2020) argues that the deeply rooted cause of the farmers protests exceeds the nitrogen and ammonia measures. Since World War II, the Dutch agricultural sector has been subject to a transformation from peasant agriculture to predominantly entrepreneurial agriculture (van der Ploeg, 2016, 2020). Many farmers have focused on the specialization, professionalization, mechanization, intensification, and rationalization of their businesses – ideas that have been propagated and subsidized by the Dutch government under the 'modernization' zeitgeist (van den Bergh, 2004). Large-scale farms with high levels of inputs, mainly depending on technology, became the norm (Bieleman, 2020). Additionally, declining margins on agricultural products have forced farmers to invest in scaling up of their farms. Hence the identity of farmers, and their opinions on good farming, are increasingly based on the internalization of agro-industrial logics, where continuous growth is essential to survive. However, many of the proposed measures, in particular suggestions about halving the total number of animals in the Netherlands, set limits to growth.

### Diverging business orientations & path dependency

It is in all probability too generalizing to speak of one universally valid agrarian professional identity. For example, not all Dutch farmers have switched to an entrepreneurial mode of agriculture. There is a considerable number of peasant farmers, who resist (to a greater or lesser extent) the adaptation of a full modernization trajectory.



The Dutch farming community is thus highly differentiated (van der Ploeg, 2020). Research shows that the idea of a stereotype entrepreneur does not hold: all farmers have their own visions on further farm development (de Lauwere & de Rooij, 2010). In 2018, 1 out of 4 agricultural businesses had a so-called multifunctional character, which means that these farms (partly) derive their income from a wide range of activities, besides solely food production (Agrimatie, 2019). Agrarian nature management is the most common activity on a multifunctional farm, but the number of care farms has also increased with 15% from 2013 to 2018 (Agrimatie, 2019; Meulen et al., 2019). On the other hand, development perspectives of nature inclusive farming and circular farming have gained a foothold among Dutch farmers, but clear numbers are lacking. One of the major preconditions before implementing such a nature inclusive farming trajectory, is the genuine motivation of the farmer involved (Runhaar et al., 2017). This precondition is strongly related to the self-conceptualization - the identity - of farmers and their opinions of what good farming entails (Westerink et al., 2018).

However, these development perspectives must be compatible with current business operations. Indeed, not all farms develop along the same trajectory path, and major changes in farming systems are limited by path dependency (Sutherland et al., 2012). Both financial, sectoral, and institutional processes and mechanisms in the wider environment determine the scope of change and transformation (Clar & Pinalla, 2011). For instance, some choices – e.g. a conversion to organic farming - are already made by predecessors, which complicates or excludes certain development trajectories. Furthermore, the geographical location of farms (i.e. the distance to urban areas) determines to a great extent the possibility of introducing multifunctional activities (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). In general, larger structures outside the farm itself are considered as main drivers of agricultural change and thus decisive for specific development trajectories (Gardner, 2002). However, path dependency should not be understood as what North calls “a story of inevitability in which the past neatly predicts the future. [...] At every step along the way were choices – political and economic - that provided real alternatives” (1990, p.98-99). Hence path dependency does not imply that farmers themselves are completely sidelined from decision-making.

### Professional identities

The concept of professional identity provides a means to further examine the assumed room for farmers to maneuver. Since the majority of literature on diversification tendencies and agricultural change tend to focus on external factors, internal factors have been underexplored. Yet precisely these internal factors, such as the perceptions, behavior, attitudes, and identities of rural actors (e.g. farmers), acknowledge the possibility of change from ‘within’ (Burton & Wilson, 2006).

In this research, specific attention will be paid to developments within the organic farming sector. This sector can be understood as a first, but explicit, indication for diversifying professional identities within the wider agricultural sector. As an illustration, a survey among farmers showed that especially organic farmers were more reserved, and less fanatic in the farmers’ strikes; as they acknowledge the need for more sustainable pathways of farming (Trouw, 2019; Gelderlander, 2019). Indeed, organic agriculture is presented as one of the promising examples to tackle environmental issues (Eyhorn et al., 2019). Although in 2019 the share of organic cultivated farmland amounted to only 3.2 percent of the total Dutch agricultural acreage, the number of organic businesses in the Netherlands is growing over the last few years (CBS, 2020b).

Recent survey outcomes reveal that within organic farming too, farmers profile themselves rather differently along development pathways (Agrario Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). Crucially, this can be understood as another indication for the existence of diversifying professional identities within the organic sector itself. Hence this research will further explore the notion of diversifying professional identities within the Dutch organic farming sector.

### **Problem statement: fuzziness of agrarian professional identities**

In the body of literature on professional identities we can identify a wide range of factors that might impact agrarian professional identities (e.g., Bryant, 1999; Annes & Wright, 2016). These factors range from education level, age, and work experience outside the agricultural sector to changing gender relations, modernization paradigms and different perceptions of good farming. Hence a professional identity is the outcome of a dynamic interplay between a broad spectrum of factors.

Professional identity is therefore not a static concept, but subject to change and transformation. Particularly in settings dominated by family farms, such as in the Netherlands, an exploration of professional identities should include gender roles. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the role of farm women - working on and off-farm - has changed over the years. Consequently, especially on organic family farms where multiple people are involved in decision-making processes, the concept of one single professional identity is questionable. The focus should therefore not solely lie on the professional identity of the (male) farmer, but on the professional identities of both partners involved.

Hence this research aims to unravel those factors that explain different farm orientations within organic agriculture, with special attention for the role of non-agrarian work experiences of both partners on family farms and in different periods during their life.

## **1.2 Outline of report**

The next chapter consists of the theoretical framework for this research and discusses the urge to centralize the idea of professional identities, while emphasizing how a static perspective of the concept has several limitations. Hence the last section of the theoretical framework introduces the concept of blended identities, that could provide a means to apply the idea of professional identities in an appropriate agrarian context.

Subsequently, Chapter 3 – the methodology - starts with stating the main objective of this research and the formulated research question and sub-questions. This chapter outlines and justifies all methodological choices that have been made regarding selecting interviewees, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the data. The results of the conducted research and the answers to the research questions are described in chapter 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 4 answers the first research questions and analyzes the key differences in professional identities among Dutch organic farmers. Then chapter 5 elucidates the role of non-agrarian work experience, and its impact on professional identities and farm orientations. Next, chapter 6 answers the last sub-question, and explores to what extent the previously discussed key differences in professional identities can be explained with the notion of blended professional identities between partners.

Chapter 7 entails the discussion and reflects on the concepts and theories used, methodological choices and limitations of this research. Finally, an overall answer to the research questions and summary of the findings will be outlined in the concluding Chapter 8. All additional materials, such as an overview of interviews, interview topic list and coding tree, can be found in the Appendix.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The introductory chapter refers to the concept 'professional identity' multiple times, without giving a clear explanation of it. Therefore, several theories and concepts that relate to the construction of a professional identity will be discussed below. It includes an introduction to identity, the role of identity in rural social sciences, and the concept of farming styles. Finally, the theoretical debate clarifies why multiple expressions of blended identities are crucial to further explore the fuzziness of professional identities. Attention will be paid to various complicating factors in relation to the dynamic character of professional identities.

### 2.1 Identity in farming

#### Introduction to identity

Due to diverse schools of thought within sociology, the role of identity has been a topic of discussion. Anthony Giddens, one of the most prominent sociologists, considers identity as "a self-image that is located within an ongoing narrative of the self, which is reflexively constructed and reconstructed and is used as an interpretive basis for action" (Bryant, 1999, p.241). According to Giddens' structuration theory, human agency is expressed through social systems, beliefs, attitudes, and identities, while structure is based on the incorporation of wider exogenous forces (Giddens, 1984 in Hotho, 2008; Burton & Wilson, 2006). Hence the self-conceptualization of individuals is considered the driver of one's behavior (McGuire et al., 2013).

More specifically than identity in general, a professional identity refers to the knowledge, emotions, abilities, and experiences organized around a particular professional role (Giddens, 1991 in Eliot & Turns, 2011). Since a profession deals with external forces and larger structures, a professional identity is the outcome of the interaction between both structure and agency. Interestingly, professional identities, as well as gender identities, are considered "amongst the most important in the individual's pantheon of idealized role identities" (Gordon, 1976, p. 407).

A professional identity can relate to several occupational categories, instead of being restricted to one main occupation (Burton & Wilson, 2006). Gordon (1976) explains this phenomenon with the notion that people take up multiple role identities in relation to work, "such as work identity constructed within the household or external identities driven by notions of career" (Burton & Wilson, 2006, p.98). Hence a professional identity is not static but fluid; it is the "reflexive re-writing of self" (Trede, 2012, p.162).

#### Rural social sciences on professional identity

The concept of identity in farming has not been left unexplored by rural sociologists. For a long time, scholars highlighted the existence of a specific 'agrarian' identity, widely shared among the farmer community. The debate on peasantry and the implications of a peasant mode of production touches on the notion of identity several times, but does not explicitly mention the concept as such. In the same vein, Bryant (1999) argues there is a lack of distinction between the concept of agrarian ideology and agrarian identity. Agrarian ideology is often based on static perspectives of locality, rurality and traditionality (Gray, 1996). Furthermore, agrarian ideology is considered to support a traditional gender division of labor and gendered identities (Alston, 1995). Hence the

concept of agrarian ideology has similarities with agrarian identity, but cannot completely replace the notion of a professional identity in farming.

Nevertheless, over the years a growing interest developed among rural sociologists to explore differences between farmers. The farming style approach, as coined by one of the early rural sociologists Evert Willem Hofstee in 1953, has been used to examine interregional differentiation among farmers across the Netherlands. Since farmers in different regions reacted in multiple ways to the modernization zeitgeist and either incorporated or resisted corresponding practices and techniques, rural sociologists made use of two categories to distinguish farmers in their 'culture pattern'. According to this idea, modern-dynamic farmers were, in contrast to traditional farmers, rational, individualistic, progressive and eager to innovate (Maso, 1986; Hofstee, 1953).

Starting in the 1990s, notions of identity and culture received more attention in understanding farmers behavior – in contrast to previous economic and attitudinal theories (Burton et al., 2020). The revival of the farming styles approach in the 1980s-1990s, when the (negative) consequences of the transformation of the agricultural sector came to light, reflects this new trend. Unlike before, the concept was now used to specifically indicate and interpret intraregional variety. Even within regions, farmers had different opinions on what good farming entails and on the implications of being a farmer (van der Ploeg, 1994).

### Farming styles & good farming

Following Hofstee, this research understands farming styles as “a generally accepted way within a group in which one organizes and runs his company” (Hofstee, 1985, p.227). Building upon the notion of farming styles, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg defines farming styles on the basis of three different levels: *perceptions*, *practice*, and *position* (Bremmer et al., 2014; Roep, 2000; van der Ploeg, 1993, 1995). Perceptions indicate that a farming style is inherently connected with opinions on what 'good farming' entails. It is a specific lens of understanding reality and giving meaning to it. These perceptions come together in a specific practice, a coherent whole. A farming style relates not only to the company itself: external factors set the boundaries of the space in which farmers can operate – the level of position (van der Ploeg, 1993; Wiskerke et al., 1994). Therefore, changes in the environment may lead to new possibilities, or force farmers to come up with new strategies. A farming style originates from the interaction between intentions and the relevant environment (Wiskerke et al., 1994). Focusing on farming styles is thus not only crucial to understand why farmers do what they do, but mostly to understand where they come from and what they are planning to do in the future (Bremmer et al., 2014).

This farming styles approach emphasizes the cultural aspect of professional identities, expressed through different thoughts on good farming. In this context, certain farm related decisions illustrate a cultural identity which exceeds a business strategy (Maso, 1986). For instance, a cow breed has an “associative, emotional meaning that goes far beyond their purely economic function” (Maso, 1986, p.61). This so-called cultural identity is especially crucial for farmers with a rarer cow breed, since these farmers are outnumbered in agricultural policy structures. A shared identity strengthens a feeling of connectedness and enables the creation of informal networks (Maso, 1986).

Although a farming style provides guidance, a change in farming style often requires a substantial identity adaptation and vice versa. Indeed, “the images a farmer holds about her/himself significantly affect behavior and the decisions made about the farm business” (Seabrook & Higgins, 1998, p.99). For instance, Deuffic & Candau (2006) stress how the process of ecologization inherently questions the underlying building

blocks of farmers' professional identity, which has predominantly been based on food production. It is argued that a conversion towards agro-ecological or organic farming implies a strong and deep transformation of farmers professional identities, with corresponding ideas of what it means to be a 'good farmer' (Malanski et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2018; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Sutherland, 2013). Similarly, the introduction of no-tillage practices requires a substantial change in professional identities of farmers. For many farmers, ploughing is considered 'real farming', which makes it difficult for farmers to identify themselves as no-tillers (Schneider et al., 2012, p. 250). Hence a farming styles approach and the concept of professional identity are strongly intertwined.

## 2.2 Complicating factors in relation to a professional identity in farming

### Family farming: changing gender roles & interacting identities

Although the entrepreneur itself is often the focus point in farming styles research, adopting a wider perspective is indispensable. Indeed, farming styles are shaped within family structures and may be prone to mutual tensions, since all family members may have different roles, ambitions, and perspectives regarding the future of the farm (Bremmer et al., 2014). Burton & Wilson (2006) criticize a static and single perception of the farming styles approach, but their notion of identity in farming still focuses predominantly on the leader on farm and thus ignores the idea of multiple people and identities present.

The majority of literature on agrarian professional identities struggles with the implications of an agricultural setting dominated by family farms, as is the case in the Netherlands. In 2016, 92 percent of all agricultural businesses were so-called family farms (CBS, 2016). Particularly in family farm settings, verification of identities often takes place within the farm household. For instance, Shortall (2014) explores how both men and women on farm construct their work identities through interaction with each other. This expression of multiple identities should be taken into account, especially since gender roles on family farms - including the position of women in particular - have undergone serious transformations.

A family business, such as a family farm, is a production unit that strongly relies on gender relations, including marital and family relations (Friedmann, 1986). Since the family farm is generally the unit of analysis, little attention is paid to intrinsic mechanisms and the people inside the unit. Until the 1990s, women on farm were assumed as members of the farming family with corresponding interests (de Rooij, 1992). However, processes of specialization and scaling up, stimulated by the transformation of the agrarian sector as briefly mentioned in the introduction, have had widespread implications for the division of labor on farm. Due to the creation of new tasks and the disappearance, extension or subdivision of other tasks, farm women's opportunities to think, talk and decide about the business as a whole have changed (de Rooij, 1992).

Additionally, due to changes in women's entrepreneurial activities on the farm, identities have changed as well (Kelly & Shortall 2002; Bock 2004; Brandth & Haugen 2010 in Shortall, 2014). Yet rural sociologist Bryant (1999) argues that the professional identity of both farm men and women were considered constant and homogeneous for a long time. Only from the 1990s onwards, research that focused on the variation in occupational identities of farming women revealed a distinction between women who considered themselves a farmer's wife - as helpers - and those who saw themselves as farming women (Finch 1983; Alston 1990; 1991). The concept of farmer's wife implied that "women who are married to farmers live their life in the context of their husband's job and that they (and others) define their working life in the context of their marriage

rather than the tasks they perform” (Bryant, 1999, p.237). However, farming women are not just helping with the daily tasks, but are actively involved in farm decision-making processes (Whatmore 1991; Shaver 1991). Indeed, the occupational identity of farming women is not necessarily based on values around wifehood, but mainly on factors of farm ownership, voluntary activities and paid off-farm work (O’Hara, 1994).

Similarly, van der Burg (2002) makes a distinction between female farmers who ended up in farming through marriage and professional female farmers. Yet she argues that the occupational identity of professional female farmers has been neglected for a long time. Furthermore, one can observe a new group of female professional entrepreneurs on farm who are not involved in agricultural activities. These entrepreneurs embody a multifunctional farm character through the provision of childcare, education, and tourism. Indeed, women are considered strong drivers behind the introduction of pluri-activities (de Rooij et al., 1995).

In light of these changing gender roles and modernization tendencies, Bryant (1999) observed that some occupational identities may have shifted outside the farming sector. This is especially true for women with a non-agrarian job, who consider farming their partner’s job. In general, women on family farms are more active on the labor market (off-farm work) compared to forty years ago (Kelly & Shortall 2002; Bock 2004; Brandth & Haugen 2010 in Shortall, 2014). Indeed, more and more daughters and female partners on Dutch family farms derive their professional identity from a different sphere of work (van der Burg, 2002). Hence it is crucial to further explore the effect of these changing gender roles on farmers’ professional identities.

### Multiple identities

Besides the notion of multiple people and thus identities on family farms, this section introduces a new expression of multiple identities. The farming styles approach presumes the existence of a distinctive, homogenous professional identity. Yet this claim has been questioned by scholars from the field of economics. For instance, Howden & Vanclay (2000) and Burton & Wilson (2006) argue that previous research on van der Ploeg’s farming styles concept indicated that farmers had difficulty adhering to one farming style, and often chose for multiple conflicting styles. Therefore, Burton & Wilson (2006, p.100) speak of “empirical evidence to support the notion of multiple farming identities, which problematizes the farming styles approach”. The authors have created a hypothetical conceptualization of farmers’ identity salience, which is defined as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.290).

This conceptualization of multiple farmer identities builds upon the ideas of sociologists Stets and Burke (2005; 2009). These authors claim that people have multiple identities based on different social networks and positions, some of which may be activated by the social context (McGuire et al., 2013). Indeed, farmers do not solely identify themselves as ‘farmer’ (Burton et al., 2020). On the other hand, small-scale or part-time farmers often strongly identify with their farming occupation, which does not necessarily need to be their main occupation (Coughenour, 1995). Identities are thus crucially considered multiple and negotiable (Holloway, 2002).

Similarly, McGuire et al. (2013) argue that an individual may encompass multiple farming identities that mutually interact. However, the functioning of farming identities is complicated, and whether individuals maintain or change their identities is, among other things, influenced by feedback from the wider social or physical environment

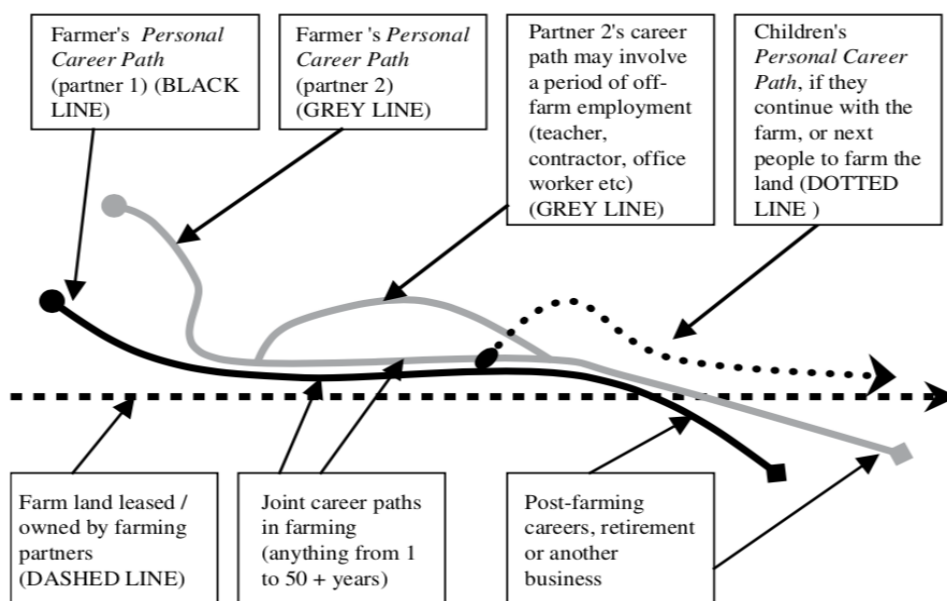
(McGuire et al., 2013). Again, this notion of changing, multiple identities problematizes the concept of a static and single professional identity.

### Dynamics of a non-agricultural background & work experience

Non-agricultural backgrounds, and in particular work experience outside agriculture, should be examined in relation to identity, as it further problematizes the idea of static professional identities. This is especially relevant since work experience outside the agricultural sector is considered an important driver for a non-conventional business orientation (Oostindië et al., 2009). This tendency is particularly visible in the organic farming sector: organic farmers – and their partners - have non-agrarian work experience more frequently than their conventional colleagues. Furthermore, these farmers and their partners also typically have other types of non-agrarian work experience compared to conventional farmers (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020).

Burton & Wilson (2006, p.109) describe the importance of a non-agricultural background in relation to their identity typology of farmers. Farmers who did not learn farming “through a close relationship with the farming community” tend to have more moderate productivist identities compared to farmers who are born in a farming community. Similarly, Bryant (1999) argues that a more varied and more recent history in off-farm activities and jobs, in particular in the tertiary sector, is characteristic for people with more detraditionalized identities. Even the history of parents’ work is an explanatory factor for the diversity in farmers’ professional identities in her research.

Farmar-Bowers & Lane (2009) highlight how this work experience component takes shape within a family farm and how it amplifies the dynamic character of professional identities, as depicted below in Figure 1. Motivations for off-farm careers are context-specific: to accumulate extra financial capital - in order to continue farming – or to pursue personal ambitions and goals. The authors suggest that having multiple career paths might lead to the construction of other occupational identities, e.g. ‘teacher’ or ‘property developer’. In turn, these non-farming identities might change how farm people perceive farming decisions and their agrarian professional identity (Farmar-Bowers & Lane, 2009).



**Figure 1.** The relationship between personal career paths and the management of the farm. Source: Farmar-Bowers & Lane, 2009.

## **Conclusion: dynamics in professional identities**

The above-mentioned ideas of a farming styles approach, changing gender relations, and multiple and interacting identities are all factors that have shaped the notion of identity in farming. In this chapter, these factors have been used to illustrate and unravel the conceptualization of professional identities. These factors truly stress the complexity of the concept in relation to farming. In other words, professional identity is a dynamic, – far from static – differentiating concept and can therefore only be fully understood from a dynamic perspective. The beforementioned approaches have attempted to give meaning to the dynamics and changes in agrarian professional identities. However, these approaches have not sufficiently emphasized the idea of blended identities, which is – according to various research indications – of more importance in agriculture than recognized to date.

Although the idea of blended identities has been left underexplored in agrarian literature, the concept is prominent in other fields of research. It refers to a situation where multiple identities are simultaneously salient, and thus collectively shape the conceptualization of the self (Rubenstein & Nolan, 2009). Many authors from different disciplines use the concept of blended identities to make sense of identity dynamics for individuals. This approach is indeed of importance in relation to this research, but it is crucial to extend the understanding of blended professional identities specifically for the agrarian context. Given the agricultural setting of predominantly family farms in the Netherlands (with several people and thus identities present), a blended identities approach should include a focus on interaction between identities of multiple people. The reformulated conceptualization of blended identities in agriculture therefore implies the salience of multiple professional identities within and between individuals.

The beforementioned factors all pinpoint towards the existence of multiple expressions of blended professional identities, which are both manifested over time in relation to non-agrarian work experience, and as the outcome of interaction between partners within a family farm. Hence this research explores to what extent these different expressions of blending are present within the Dutch organic farming sector and how these expressions relate to both the construction of a professional identity and to the notion of diversifying professional identities.



## 3. Research questions and methodology

The preceding chapter - which outlines the theoretical framework – closes with a short description of the aim of this research. A more thorough outline of this research will be described below, starting with the research questions and objective. Attention will be paid to the relevance, setting and design of this research. The last sections of this chapter offer useful insights into the specific methods used for data collection and analysis.

### 3.1 Research questions & objective

In order to explore the topic as introduced in Chapter 1 and 2, the main research question reads:

*To which degree do we witness diversifying professional identities in the Dutch organic sector?*

Subsequently, the following sub-questions have been formulated:

RQ1: *What are key differences in professional identities among Dutch organic farmers?*

RQ2: *What is the role of non-agrarian work experience in relation to the construction of a professional identity?*

RQ3: *To what extent can these key differences be explained by blending of professional identities between partners within family farming?*

The objective of this research is to gain an understanding of diversifying professional identities on Dutch organic family farms and its impact on farm orientations by exploring the role of non-agrarian work experience and the interaction of multiple professional identities.

### 3.2 Relevance

The relevance of this research is twofold. Firstly, this research provides new insights into the growing diversity in professional identities within Dutch organic agriculture. In particular, this research elucidates on the role of non-agrarian work experience and blended identities within family farms: aspects that so far have been underexposed in literature on professional identities in farming. These various expressions of blending identities are relevant and unique, and essential to explore diversifying professional identities within organic farming. Secondly, besides contributing to the scientific debate on professional identities, a greater understanding of the concept of professional identities in farming could serve as a building block for further research and future policies in relation to farm development orientations. Hence this research has both a scientific and societal value.

### 3.3 Research design

This thesis builds upon an extensive study among the agrarian workforce in the Netherlands, conducted by publisher Agrio and Wageningen University & Research. The

study has been executed in the form of a survey, in which questions focused on the future of Dutch farmers, both in terms of possibilities and limitations. Respondents were asked, among other things, to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following development trajectories for their farms: 1) *world market orientation* 2) *mixed cost savings* 3) *added value through product processing or direct sales* 4) *provision of green and blue services* 5) *extra income through broadening* 6) *extra income from non-agrarian activities* 7) *part-time farming* (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). Overall survey results point to great diversity in farmers' preferences regarding these different farm developments, including within the sub-category of organic farms. These diversifying preferences are understood as indications for different professional identities, also given the relatively high percentages of female respondents in this sub-category, and frequency of work experiences outside agriculture of respondents and their partners.

Despite all the relevant insights this research has offered, the survey focused predominantly on the 'what-question' by mapping the status of the agricultural sector. The motives behind and incentives towards certain perspectives have been left unexplored. Therefore, this research further examines these perspectives, and explores underlying dynamics regarding the construction and blending of professional identities. In order to do so, a qualitative and explorative research has been conducted. Quantitative methods are less equipped to gain insights into the train of thoughts of the farmers involved and to give meaning to those findings. Therefore, interviews act as the main tool to interpret and explain the opinions of the interviewees on their professional identity (Boeije et al., 2009). Hence this research strongly builds upon those interpretations, views and ideas of farmers and their partners themselves. An additional literature study on agrarian and professional identity with relating key concepts helps to place the findings in a relevant and scientific context. This literature study contains both academic and non-academic sources, such as policy documents and news articles.

### 3.4 Setting

This research has been executed as part of the MSc program Organic Agriculture at the WUR. However, this research is not an official publication of Wageningen University & Research. Supervision is provided by dr. ir. Henk Oostindië from the chair group Rural Sociology. As discussed before, this research builds on former research commissioned by publisher Agrio, which has been carried out by employees of the WUR. This research is independent, and therefore raw data has not been shared with this party. Only the final output, a written report that guarantees anonymity and confidentiality, can be shared on request. The final thesis will be uploaded to the Library of the WUR.

### 3.5 Methods – data collection

#### Interview type & conditions

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with organic farmers have formed the basis of this research. These more free-flowing interviews rely on the social interaction between the researcher and interviewee. This method allows the interviewer to ask deeper questions than those that were thought of in advance, and this gives space for getting a more elaborate understanding of certain topics (Boeije et al., 2009). Moreover, this interview style provides an opportunity to adjust the interview to the atmosphere in which it is conducted (Minichiello et al., 2008). However, an interview list with all relevant topics that needed to be covered - adjusted to the specifics of the farm and interviewee - was made in advance (see Appendix, annex 2 Interview Topic List).

Given the restrictions regarding Covid-19, unfortunately the (majority of the) interviews were conducted online. Depending on the preferences of the interviewee, the interview took place by phone or through online video calling platforms. Only two interviews took place on farm (see Appendix, annex 1 Interview table). The interviews were conducted in Dutch, as a shared native language offers the interviewees more freedom to express their opinions and arguments. Since the interview data are the building blocks for this thesis, the researcher asked permission to process the data in a written thesis.

### Selection of interviewees

The fact that almost twice as many organic farm women as conventional farm women (22,4% vs 13,4%) have filled in the research survey suggest that organic farm women are more actively involved in decision-making processes (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). Simultaneously, this indicated that these women on farm are of importance in relation to the construction of a professional identity within the family farm and hence for this research. Since most literature on farmer typologies and identities has been partly responsible for the invisibility of women on contemporary farms (as only one person per farm household was interviewed, often the male 'primary farmer'), this thesis centralized women on farm as a starting point.

This research made use of a set-up in which the researcher returned to the participants of the former Agrio survey to further explore the topic of diversifying professional identities and underlying mechanisms. This has been done through in-depth interviews. Given the limited resources, this research consists of a total number of 11 in-depth interviews with both livestock, arable and horticulture organic and biodynamic (BD) farmers in the Netherlands. No representativeness can be claimed, also considering the explorative character of this research.

Initially, only female respondents within the group of organic businesses who indicated that they want to participate in follow-up research were contacted. The researcher sent an explanatory letter to the selected women, which was approved and signed by the head of the Rural Sociology chair group of Wageningen University & Research. This letter contained a short summary of the research and stated its major objective.

The number of respondents of the former Agrio survey that matched the selection criteria was limited (5), but they were all willing to participate in this research. Although no definite claim can be made, the high response rate might reflect the urgency and relevance of this topic. Since the number of interviews originating from contacts of previous research was insufficient, the snowball method has been employed to obtain the desired number of interviews (Benard, 2002). A precondition that applied to the selection of interviewees, was their active role, in one way or another, on the farm. These interviewees approached via the snowball method did not participate in the former survey of the WUR and publisher Agrio. Therefore, they were asked to still fill in an Excel version of the survey with the most relevant questions, in order to strive for a certain degree of conformity and to use as guideline for the interview.

### Interview format

Prior to the in-depth interviews, a short preliminary interview was conducted via a phone call. This short talk was meant to better understand the involvement of the woman on farm, as well as to grasp a first understanding of which expressions of blended identities are specifically important in relation to professional identities. During this call, the

researcher asked for a follow-up interview on how their professional identity comes about and how they perceive the development of their family farms.

Whether the partner of the female farmer, if there was one, was interviewed depended on the situation of the interviewees themselves. If the interviewee indicated in the first talk that she runs the farm together with her partner and both are involved in decision-making, the option for a so-called joint interview was discussed – but only when the interviewee and partner were willing to do so. In the end, three out of the total number of 11 interviews were joint interviews.

### **3.6 Methods – data analysis**

Firstly, the 11 interviews, which were recorded by phone, have been uploaded on the researcher's laptop with the use of her WUR account. Subsequently, the interviews have been manually transcribed – in the most accurate way possible (McLellan et al., 2003). These transcriptions were subsequently translated to English (in order to use them in this report). This took place in two phases: in the first round five interviews were conducted and transcribed, followed by a second round of conducting and transcribing six interviews. After scanning the transcripts, a first preliminary coding scheme was set up based on concepts, words, or reasons that frequently popped up. This coding scheme has been improved and adjusted to the theoretical framework and formulated research questions. Hence this research makes use of a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). After that, the transcripts were uploaded in the coding program Atlas.ti, where the created codes have been applied to the relevant text passages in the data. A coding scheme can be found in the Appendix, annex 3. The coding program was exclusively accessible by the researcher.

The processed interview data will be presented in chapter 4, 5, and 6. Permission has been asked to record the interview and to use the – anonymized - data in the final report. Taking into account the privacy of the interviewees, personal characteristics and details, such as names, farm location etcetera, are not mentioned in this report. Specific quotes of interviewees are therefore accompanied by the reference style R(x). In this way, it is impossible for outsiders to identify the interviewee.

## 4. Key Differences in Professional Identities

### Introduction: profile of the research population

Before answering the first sub-question by highlighting key differences in farmers' professional identities, this section portrays the research population on the basis of several farm(er) characteristics. Hence it provides a better understanding of the person – and farm - behind interviewee Rx and makes the story easier to follow.

Table 1 (depicted below) shortly describes the type of the farm, the agrarian sector, and non-agrarian activities present on farm. It gives a varied image: interviewees farm both organically and biodynamically, and their sector ranges from dairy farming to horticulture. Interestingly, most interviewees – who are spread across the country - have multiple non-agrarian activities.

Additionally, table 2 offers an insight into interviewees' perceptions on farm development perspectives as drafted in the Agrio survey. While a quick scan may indicate that these results are rather homogeneous (e.g. all interviews take a negative stance towards world market orientation and part-time farming), a closer look reveals remarkable differences. Interviewees' perceptions on the provision of green and blue services highly differ: for some it might be a realistic development perspective and source of income, while others consider it an undesirable future farm trajectory.

Crucially, these tables do not solely demonstrate the variety in farm characteristics and orientations, they moreover serve as an indication for diversified professional identities among the research population. Indeed, interviewees highlight the existing diversity among the organic farmers community itself. Hence this chapter builds upon these valuable data and insights, and explores differences in aspects of professional identities that came forward in the conducted interviews. Therefore, the following sections elaborate on differences in the scope of farming, farmer roles, and the meaning of organic. Importantly, these three topics overlap: the delineation of farming affects self-perceptions of farmers and corresponding farmer roles and in turn the meaning of organic for one's professional identity. While I acknowledge the entangled nature of these topics, the following organization of this chapter contributes to a better structure of the narrative.

	<i>Type of farm</i>	<i>Agrarian sector</i>	<i>Non-agrarian activities</i>
<b>R1</b>	Organic	Dairy farming	Farm shop + catering + care
<b>R2</b>	Organic	Beef farming	Agrarian nature & landscape management + recreation/tourism + farm shop + catering + energy production
<b>R3</b>	Organic	Dairy farming + Beef farming	Farm shop
<b>R4</b>	Biodynamic	Arable farming + Beef farming	Agrarian nature & landscape management + farm shop + care + childcare + education + energy production + rental of buildings
<b>R5a</b>	Organic	Pig farming + Arable farming	Recreation/tourism
<b>R5b</b>			
<b>R6a</b>	Organic	Horticulture	

R6b			Recreation/tourism + farm shop + catering + care + education + processing products + energy production + rental of buildings
R7	Organic & conventional	Arable farming	
R8	Biodynamic	Arable farming + Horticulture + Beef farming	Education
R9	Biodynamic	Dairy farming + Arable farming	Agrarian nature & landscape management + recreation/tourism + care
R10	Organic	Goat farming	Agrarian nature & landscape management + recreation/tourism + energy production
R11a	Organic	Dairy farming + Beef farming	Agrarian nature & landscape management + recreation/tourism + farm shop + processing products + energy production
R11b			

**Table 1.** Profile of research population. Source: Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020.

	<i>1 World market orientation</i>	<i>2 Mixed cost savings</i>	<i>3 Added value</i>	<i>4 Provision of green-blue services</i>	<i>5 Extra income through broadening</i>	<i>6 Extra income from non-agrarian activities</i>	<i>7 Part-time farming</i>
R1	1	5	4	4	4	4	1
R2	1	4	5	3	5	-	1
R3	1	4	4	5	2	3	1
R4	1	5	5	4	3	2	1
R5	1	3	5	4	5	4	-
R6	-	5	5	1	5	1	1
R7	-	-	4	1	1	1	1
R8	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
R9	1	5	4	4	3	3	1
R10	1	3	3	3	5	5	1
R11	1	5	5	5	3	3	1

**Table 2.** Overview of interviewees' perceptions on the development perspectives as outlined by Agrio in their survey. Ranked from 1 – 5. 1 = strong negative stance & 5 = strong positive stance. X = missing value, - = interviewee does not know. Source: Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020.

## 4.1 The scope of farming

### Farming: a profession or way of life

On the basis of these differences in development trajectories, as depicted in Table 2, lie several ideas, perceptions, emotions and preferences regarding the scope of farming. One of the most remarkable differences that came forward in the interview questions the 'profession' of farming itself, and hence a professional identity. The variety in this can be

understood as a first key difference between professional identities among organic farmers.

Whether a professional farmer identity is the right term to describe the 'agrarianness' of interviewees is questionable. González & Benito (2001) argue that the concept of agricultural profession is rather blurry and interpretable in different ways. The definition of profession in relation to agriculture ranges from something as defined by "technical qualification" to "devotion to the countryside" (González & Benito, 2001, p.343). Similarly, the interview data reveals that it differs whether interviewees consider farming as their job, or first and foremost as their hobby – the latter applies for example to R6 and her partner. Working in the evening is therefore not an issue, but a logical consequence of their specific interpretation of farming. However, for the ones who consider farming primarily as their profession, it is important to make a good income compared to the working hours spent on the family farm. *"It's not a hobby, but work"* (R1).

Moreover, some interviewees claim that farming exceeds their professional identity as it means more than 'just a profession'. *"Because, well it is just really a way of life actually"* (R8). For R1, being a farmer enables a certain lifestyle, a rural life, which she highly appreciates. The far-reaching impact of such beliefs is shown by the following quote: *"Well the only thing I can add is I think that being a farmer is just my life's work, that is the interpretation of my life, the meaning in my life; that's being a farmer for me. And if you experience your work in such a way - that that is what gives meaning to your life - then you have to take it seriously because otherwise, if you don't, then there is no meaning in your life. [...] but it also makes it vulnerable that I sometimes think; suppose I could no longer be a farmer, what am I going to do with my life? Sounds a bit scary (laughing). But I am just a farmer and I just keep it like this"* (R4). This corresponds with the idea "that farming never can be just another job", but that it is an "inimitable life's experience" (Newby 1979, p.10). Hence there are contrasting notions of what farming entails, whether it a hobby, profession or way of life.

### Part-time farming

The previously described contrasting notions of farming translate themselves in divergent preferences towards the development perspective of part-time farming. Interestingly, although all interviewees in the original Agrio research took a (strong) negative stance towards the statement on part-time farming and working as employee, the interview data of this research reveals a more moderate story.

Indeed, for some organic interviewees part-time farming is completely out of question, as it limits the opportunities to fully practice farming. *"And I think, to what extent are you still a farmer. To what extent can you actually do what you have to do"* (R7). Part-time farming would detract from their professional agrarian identity. *"The moment you have work outside the house during the day and you have to do your farming in the morning and evening hours, then that falls under a hobby, while it is work that should definitely be done"* (R1). In turn, a strong identification of being a farmer may confine having a wage job outside the farm. *"No, we are just both farmers. But if you are a physiotherapist then you just have to do physiotherapy anyway." [...] I am very happy that I do not have to do it, but that is also because I am a farmer and want to be a farmer"* (R4).

However, not all interviewed farmers dislike the idea of part-time farming, or quitting farming at all. The following quote is rather telling: *"But I'm not much of a farmer who ... like our son. He has his own farm, but he really has to be a farmer. But I could also easily do other work"* (R11b). According to his partner, *"for you, being a farmer is mainly work, and not so much the complete interpretation of your life"* (R11a). Again, this shows

farmers' varying perceptions on the scope of farming. Likewise, R6 considers wage labor a possible, and likely, option in the future. Even more far-reaching, R5a and her partner are considering – due to economic and environmental reasons - to quit farming. Although this might be a likely option in the near future, it is not most preferred. *"If we look at what we would like: then it is just farming here in this place"* (R5b). Specific farm development trajectories may thus not always correspond with interviewees' preferred interpretation of their professional identities.

Hence the effect of part-time farming (or even quitting farming) on organic farmers, i.e. to what extent they still adhere to their professional farmer identity, is not straightforward. The following quote illustrates this very well: *"so on the day that I can no longer be a farmer, I just stop, then I am no longer a farmer. Although, you are it and I think you will stay it"* (R4).

### Multifunctional farming

The debate on the scope of farming cannot take place without paying attention to multifunctionality in agriculture. Multifunctional farming can be defined as farming that combines agricultural production with the provision of services to society, for example, care farming, farm education, farm shops, agrarian childcare, agrarian nature management and agrotourism. The number of multifunctional farms is rising in the past couple of decades, and 60 percent of all organic farms have multifunctional activities in addition to primary production (Sukkel & Hommes, 2009). In this research, all farms except for one can be currently described – to a greater or lesser extent – as multifunctional. However, Table 2 shows that farm futures targeted on multifunctionality are valued differently among the organic interviewees. Hence the broadening development trajectory formed the guideline to discover interviewees' stance towards multifunctionality and deeper-rooted perceptions on the relevance of agrarian activity for one's professional identity.

A multifunctional farm character, with a broad range of for example educational activities or care activities, serves for multiple interviewees as a way to derive satisfaction from their occupation. *"And that is of course not for everyone, but we really get a lot of satisfaction from it, we really enjoy receiving people at our company and showing them how things are going"* (R6). Indeed, R1 highlights that it is important that her way of farming - how she gives meaning to her professional identity - is appreciated and respected by the public. For R2 and her partner, the combination of agrarian activities and recreational activities even formed a precondition for a farm take-over. In a sense, multifunctionality can become so crucial for one's specific professional identity that it may even transcend the meaning of being an organic farmer.

However, the incorporation of additional branches should match the personality of the farmer involved, and the specific professional farming identity. *"It's so much more fun when you open things up. And I understand that not everyone wants 20,000 people a year over their yard - I understand that very well - you also have to be the type for that"* (R4). As an illustration, although multifunctionality fits well with the professional identity of R1, large-scale farm sale does not match her and her partner. *"Look, we are just really not salespeople"* (R1). The only interviewee without any multifunctional activity states: *"But anyway, it is not our thing either: we are just... we are farmers, and we are not a catering company, roughly speaking"* (R7).

Moreover, not all farmers who are currently multifunctional prefer to extend or to promote their multifunctionality in the future. *"I cannot imagine that we would be here with only a party location, or care farm, which is financially really lucrative, maybe way*



*more lucrative, but that isn't it for me" (R1). R8 and her partner really appreciate to work on the land as farmers, "just on the tractor, with people, weeding" and are afraid that the extension of other activities will only distract, in terms of time and energy, from these farming tasks. "I think we are just a farm and I just like it that they just see how things really work, rather than that we become a cuddle farm" (R8). Hence it is essential for the professional identities of multiple interviewees' that agrarian activity remains present – to a greater or lesser extent.*

## 4.2 Farmer roles

### Changing societal demands

The former section already discussed the scope of farming as a first key difference in professional identities in the organic sector. Farmers' specific professional identities are closely intertwined with perceptions on what a farmer is and should do. Since the interviews revealed a high variety regarding these perceptions, this section elucidates on the different roles and tasks that accompany the profession of farming as a second key difference.

Importantly, these perceptions of farmer roles are dynamic. Changing societal demands have had widespread implications on the occupation of farming, as illustrated by the following quote. *"And of course, there has been a generation that really had to go maximum and maximum of that production, because there had been hunger. So you cannot just blame that generation for causing so much nitrogen and producing so much mass and that therefore maybe the bottom has lost sight of something. Because no other things were asked of them [...] and now we come to understand more I think; maybe there should be a little less nitrogen, a little more in return" (R7). This interviewee refers to the widespread agricultural policy of the Dutch agricultural minister Sicco Mansholt that prevailed after World War I under the slogan 'never hunger again'. Given the famine during the winter of 1944 that was still fresh in everybody's mind, the primary task of a farmer was based on food production; quantity over quality.*

Besides the direct effects of this policy on the environment, the strong focus on food production has indirectly led to an undervaluation of other roles and tasks belonging to the profession of farming in the last few decades. As an interviewee claims: *"But agriculture has also lost a lot of social significance by going all the way into specialization and just dropping all other tasks out of your hands. Then I am talking about social issues such as care, but also landscape management and nature development, product processing and things like that" (R4). The idea of what a farmer is and should do, and related to it a professional identity, are constantly in development. The following quote of an interviewee aptly sums it up: "In my opinion I am a farmer as it should be now. That description of a farmer has simply changed" (R1).*

### Farmer as food producer

Firstly, farming and the production of food are inherently linked to each other. All interviewed farmers emphasize this core role of farming, but the extent to which the production of food impacts their professional identity differs. One interviewee, who has one of the most extended multifunctional farms (both in size and in activities) among all interviewees, stresses that food production is most important for her occupation as farmer. *"We will always want to make a living from agriculture, just with food production [...] We see all other things as a sort of social functions that we provide as a farm and we want to provide them from the abundance of the farm, and not from poverty" (R4).*

However, this quote fights against the stigma that multifunctional farming automatically implies a farming exit, or a derogation of someone's professional agrarian identity.

As for this interviewee the role of farming lies primarily with food production, it is essential for her to earn a sufficient income from agrarian activity. Up to now, the share of agrarian income of the total business income varies from a maximum of 100% to exceptional cases of less than 20% (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). Multiple interviewees expect this share of agrarian income to decline in the future. In that sense, interviewees are ambiguous about the importance of the agrarian income share for their professional identity. *"I think that as a farmer you just want to have a good income for the hours worked"* (R5b).

### Farmer as educator

Secondly, some interviewees consider informing the public on agricultural related issues one of the pivotal farmer roles, which is indispensably connected to their professional identity. For some, it might even become a *"missionary urge"* (R2). This urge is not only limited to educating citizens about the origin of food on their plate, but entails for R8 also teaching what is healthy food or how to prepare a healthy meal.

This idea of farmers as educators might directly impact farm development orientations, as it often spurs the opening of the farm to the wider public for multifunctional activities. For example, an interviewee states: *"we have always focused on citizens, on consumers. That's what you do it for. When we had just taken over the farm, we also immediately participated in open days. So open up your business"* (R11b). Likewise, for R4 this specific interpretation of the role of a farmer has been the compelling motive to amplify the connection with a neighboring city and evolve into a city farm.

### Farmer as nature manager

Thirdly, considering the environmental challenges the world is facing since the last few decades, the idea that farmers should function as nature managers and protectors has gained more attention. R1 states: *"But in my opinion, a farmer should always know how nature works. Real farming is really part of that. But that also means that you are responsible for the rural area"* (R1). Similarly, R3 stresses how being a farmer and running an agricultural company inherently entails being a nature or landscape manager. *"We produce milk, meat, a healthy soil, we produce biodiversity – lots of different plants, many insects, butterflies, bees [...] We are not paid for that, but that is how we want to be a farmer"* (R3). This responsibility of nature developer and manager can be linked to interviewees' persuasion to be a 'good farmer'. Taking care of soil life is strongly intertwined with interviewees' ideas of being a good farmer, which means *"someone who takes good care of the land he has and the environment. Yes, with an eye for what lives there, what grows and flourishes there, so to speak"* (R7).

Thereby, fulfilling the role of landscape manager may provide value for one's interpretation of being a farmer. *"Not only because we produce food, but also because you really have a share in that whole climate story. And not so much negatively about you ruining the whole climate, but also with the question; if we want to preserve the climate, how are you going to ensure that you also preserve the landscape?"* (R1). Moreover, it gives meaning to their professional farming identity: *"That you always know, that is my function in the whole, in the whole of that society - in this case the Netherlands - or perhaps the world, that is my role. I can do that, I am good at it, and I now know a lot about it. So that is our identity"* (R1).

Nonetheless, the extent to which interviewees consider nature management an essential farmer's role varies. As an illustration: *"If you think that farmers really should say, plant corners or that they should do that kind of thing and give up part of their land on which they do production ... then I actually don't think so"* (R5a). Interestingly, this quote shows how multiple farmer roles - the one of nature manager and food producer - may clash.

### 4.3 The meaning of organic

#### Organic and biodynamic

The last, but perhaps most prominent key difference in professional identities is centered around the meaning of organic. Although all interviewed farmers formally belong to the organic sector, the data show a high variety in the extent to which the aspect of organic plays a role in the professional identity of the interviewed farmers. This key difference in the importance of organic farming for farmers' professional identities cannot be examined without paying attention to the biodynamic interviewees. In this research, 3 out of 11 interviewees farm biodynamically and are officially Demeter certified. Currently, the biodynamic cultivation covers about 10 percent of the total organic cultivated acreage in the Netherlands (Demeter, 2020). This corresponds with a number of 143 certified Dutch biodynamic farm businesses, a number that has been growing over the last few years.

That the diversity regarding biodynamic (BD) organic farmers is not limited to practicalities or farming methods, is illustrated by the following quotes. For instance, a biodynamic interviewee states: *"I think as a person, the dynamic farmers are more the thinkers, the philosophers... [laughing]"* (R9). As a likely explanation, she argues that most organic farmers have converted for financial reasons, while biodynamic farmers have a stronger vision or belief in the new system. For her, biodynamic farming means more than a specific interpretation of farming and thus exceeds a purely occupational identity. *"It's a vision of life"* (R9).

Similarly, another biodynamic interviewee states: *"Yes, I do see clear differences... I also think that piece of space in thinking. Well I think that BD farmers are very enterprising in that sense, and then perhaps not so much enterprising in the sense of big bigger biggest, but in other things, new possibilities, flexible in thinking and not from; I did that last year so I want to do it again"* (R8). R9 confirms the more adapting and innovative character of a BD farmer: *"[partner] is easier with innovating I think, integrating another branch in our company. I think I can see that he is easier, or at least much more open to being more flexible in the agricultural landscape that we have"* (R9). Furthermore, biodynamic interviewees really appreciate the *"nothing is too crazy"* mentality, which according to them is characteristic for BD farmers. Interviewee R8 considers creativity and humor in farming crucial components of her professional identity, and notices that these components are lacking for many farmers - organic too - who, for example, have the same cropping plan for multiple years.

Although R8 agrees on noticing a difference in mentality between BD-farmers and organic farmers, she stresses the diversity within the biodynamic sector. Indeed, the prototype biodynamic farmer does not exist. Even though biodynamic farming is a vision of life for R9, she and her partner do not completely agree with the underlying philosophies: *"Look, we are not at all dogmatic anthroposophical or whatsoever"* (R9). Indeed, we should be careful with making strong distinctions between organic and biodynamic farmers in terms of conversion motivations, values or characteristics, partly because switching to biodynamic farming often proceeds gradually.

### Organic as identity factor

Just as biodynamic farming might be a vision of life, for some farming organically is the only way of giving meaning to their occupation. In other words: *“Well my husband already had something like that, he sometimes said with a funny face; either I go organic or I get a second wife [laughing]”* (R10). Likewise, farming organic was a precondition, *“and otherwise I wouldn't have wanted to become a farmer either”* (R11b). It may be so essential, that is more important that the land continues to be farmed organically in the future than that the family farm is taken over by biological children (R9). However, in contrast to R9, for some interviewees it is not a precondition at all that successors farm organically. The following quotes show how interviewees agree on this latter stance towards organic. *“It is not faith, it is not that for us”* [...] *“We are really organic, but not preachers”* (R5a). And, *“it is not the case with me that I say; it must be organic by definition. Not at all”* (R6).

Again, to what extent organic certification matters for farmers' professional identities differs. Although certification did give an interviewee *“the recognition that you are really organic”* (R10), the majority of the interviewed farmers converted their land or farming style many years prior to their official certification procedure. Hence the actual conversion was a minor step and not of great added value for their occupational identity. The certificate was mainly important for the anonymous market, as some outlets require an organic quality mark. Yet for one interviewee, the official conversion with all legislations generated some difficulties or confusion regarding her professional identity and self-conceptualization. *“I sometimes say: I actually don't want to be in that box because then, the organic box, because yes, [...] it is different all over the world. But at one point someone said: yes, but conventional is also a box”* (R3). In the end, the organic system fitted best with her interpretation of being a farmer.

Lastly, it varies whether the organic aspect in general predominates in farmers' professional identities. Although R3 owns an extensive multifunctional farm, the organic character is decisive for her in terms of farm(er) identification. On the other hand, organic farmers may adhere more value to their specific branch – *“I'm a cow farmer”* – than to their organic character. For example, pigs are the linchpin of the farm and decisive for the agricultural identity of R5a. Hence she will not describe herself a farmer anymore if they leave the pig sector, even though they technically would still be arable farmers given their acreage. *“But I just don't care about arable farming”* (R5a). It is the specific combination of being a pig farmer, an organic farmer and a cuddle farmer that matters for her professional identity. This corresponds with the notion of Burton & Wilson (2006) of multiple farming identities. As an illustration: *“Well if you have to sort it out then BD farmer is the most important, and then organic, and then city farmer”* (R4). Hence being an organic farmer is thus a component of a professional identity, and its meaning differs from person to person.

### Growing organic identity

Interestingly, the importance of farming organically in relation to a professional identity may change over time. An interviewee, who made the conversion to organic farming first and foremost out of economic reasons, stresses: *“we have actually only become more and more organic ourselves”* (R5a). Or in the words of an organic horticulturist: *“I am now completely over”* (R6). Similarly, *“and sometimes, over time, you can stand more and more behind your choice, so to speak. Getting a bit more fanatic”* (R11a). Another interviewee describes how in her experience organic farmers have a certain openness. However, according to her, this is not yet the case for those who just made the conversion to organic

farming, because of their old professional agrarian identity. Hence developing a certain aspect of a professional identity may take time.

At the same time, it depends on the specific situation and farmers' expectations whether or how this organic identity fully develops. When asking an interviewee whether she now feels more an organic farmer than in the beginning, she said: *"Yes and no. I prefer it to be clean and tidy and they [family members] are a bit easier with that and I just have to find a balance in that. That it also suits me personally"* (R10). She explains how switching to organic mismatches with her idea of a certain cleanliness – which she was especially used to from her youth on a more traditional farm. *"Well, the first year I had a lot of trouble that the land... it was all blades and weeds and nettles, I just had to get used to that"* (R10). Her image of a farmer and what a farm should look like did not correspond with her ideas of organic farming. Some of these ideas are based on persistent stereotypes of organic farmers: so-called old school hippies and 'messy' growers. When converting to organic, the father-in-law of an interviewee stated: *"huh, do you want to go into the ground? Back to square one? For him that was really a setback"* (R6a). Hence reactions from and opinions within the social environment, especially those of predecessors, may further hinder the development of a strong professional organic identity.

## Conclusion

This chapter has formulated an answer to the first sub-question by reviewing three (interconnected) key differences in professional identities among organic farmers, namely 1) the scope of farming, 2) farmer roles and 3) the meaning of organic. Interviews have shown that organic farmers' perceptions on these themes highly differ. Hence these key differences serve as indications for the idea of diversifying professional identities in the Dutch organic sector. Therefore, the next chapter will elaborate on the role of non-agrarian work experience, both in the construction of one's professional identity and as a possible explanatory blending mechanism for the notion of diversifying professional identities in organic farming.

## 5. The Role of Non-Agrarian Work Experience

### Introduction: varied professional backgrounds

This chapter elucidates on the role of non-agrarian work experience in relation to the construction of professional farming identities. It thus attempts to formulate an answer to the second sub-question of this research. Although former research, already briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, points to the impact of a personal non-farming background on farmers' identities, this chapter centralizes the influence of non-farming work-related experiences. Since both previous and current work experience outside the agricultural sector will be incorporated, this chapter explores a blending mechanism that manifests itself over time. The first section analyzes the relevance of interaction between different professional identities in light of non-agrarian work experience. Next, the second section discusses the impact of work experience outside agriculture on organic farmers' professional identities, while the last section aims to unravel the meaning of these work experiences regarding specific farm development trajectories. Table 3, depicted below, already reveals a glimpse of the varied professional backgrounds of the interviewees.

	<i>Current non-agrarian work</i>	<i>Former non-agrarian work</i>	<i>Current non-agrarian work (partner)</i>	<i>Former non-agrarian work (partner)</i>
<b>R1</b>	No	Yes (Consultancy)	No	Yes (Engineering, production & construction)
<b>R2</b>	No	Yes (Trade & services)	No	Yes (Trade & services)
<b>R3</b>	Yes (Consultancy)	Yes (Consultancy)	No	Yes (Trade & services)
<b>R4</b>	No	Yes (Consultancy + Education, culture & science)	No	Yes (Education, culture & science)
<b>R5a</b>	No	Yes (Education, culture & science)	X	X
<b>R5b</b>	No	No	X	X
<b>R6a</b>	No	Yes (Healthcare & wellbeing)	X	X
<b>R6b</b>	No	No	X	X
<b>R7</b>	No	Yes (Consultancy)	No	No
<b>R8</b>	Yes (Education, culture & science)	Yes (Education, culture & science)	No	No
<b>R9</b>	Yes (Healthcare and wellbeing)	Yes (Healthcare and wellbeing)	No	Yes (Trade & services)
<b>R10</b>	No	Yes (Tourism, recreation & catering)	No	No
<b>R11a</b>	No	Yes (Trade & services)	X	X
<b>R11b</b>	Yes (Consultancy)	Yes (Consultancy)	X	X

**Table 3.** Overview of interviewees' past and present work experiences. In case of joint interviews: Ra = female interviewee, Rb = male interviewee (partner). X = N/A. Source: Agrio, 2020.

## 5.1 Multiple professional identities and self-perceptions

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, organic farmers – and their partners – more frequently have non-agrarian work experience than their conventional colleagues (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). In other words, for a very large share of organic businesses applies that non-agrarian work experience is present, especially when looking at it from a family business perspective. To put a number on it, only 14.5 percent of organic respondents and their partners do not have any work experience outside agriculture (Agrio Special Bedrijfsontwikkeling, 2020). As Table 3 shows, in this research all interviewees – or their partners – have or had work experience outside the farm. Hence one professional identity is ambiguous; as multiple professional identities may develop and manifest.

Indeed, the data of this research show that past or present work experience may foster the co-existence of multiple professional identities. Logically, interviewees who currently have a job in education or health care also develop a professional identity as educator or health care professional. The question arises to what extent interviewees who currently (also) have a non-agrarian job develop a professional agrarian identity. Bryant (1999) already observed that some occupational identities may completely shift outside the farming sector, which is especially true for women with a non-agricultural job. As an illustration, an interviewee – with a non-agrarian job in health care - had difficulties identifying herself as organic farmer and preferred to describe her agrarian professional identity as *“co-owner of a biodynamic farm”* (R9). Another interviewee argues how their non-agrarian jobs prevented her and her partner from developing a strong professional agrarian identity in the beginning of their farming career (R2).

The struggle that interviewees with work experience in a non-agricultural field express regarding developing an agrarian identity relates to the ongoing debate on women in farming. As an illustration, interviewee R9 states: *“If you really are a farm woman, you also put on your overalls in the morning and... I see it with my neighbor from the cheese farm, yes she’s also cleaning tractors with a high-pressure sprayer and she also makes cheese, she is really busy with the product that is produced there. That’s completely in her DNA, that is her daily schedule. I think that’s a farm woman”*. Given this interviewee’s strict perception of a farm woman, she does not consider herself a farmer in the sense that agrarian tasks are not her (only) primary responsibility. Despite her frequently executed tasks on the farm, she struggles to uphold an agrarian occupational identity.

In contrast to R9, interviewee R3 consciously describes herself as a farmer and adheres to her agrarian professional identity even though her non-agrarian job takes up the majority of working hours. Being a farmer is most important to her: *“Yes, it [farming] is your identity, I think. It makes who you are. And that is the care for a piece of earth that has been entrusted to us and the animals, and the living and working in nature”* (R3). Hence work experience outside agriculture, in the past or present, and corresponding professional identity does not automatically exclude the possibility to develop a strong agrarian professional identity. It is therefore crucial to further explore the interaction between multiple professional identities.

## 5.2 The impact on professional agrarian identities

### Farmer characteristics: entrepreneurial attitudes

The previous chapters already shed some light on the existing diversity in farmers’ characteristics. Interestingly, working outside the agricultural sector, or at least outside the farm, may strengthen certain competencies and skills in relation to farmers’ agrarian

professional identities. For instance, the professional advertisement and communication background enabled R2 to take up a more pragmatic interpretation of being a farmer. *"I have also learned to look at it much more professionally than many farmers do. Especially in advertising, I just had to run billable every hour or at least I had to tell what I was doing, why it wasn't billable. And that is a certain mindset that you have when you start for yourself"* (R2). Hence she describes herself as a type of farmer with a strong focus on entrepreneurship. Likewise, the former job of the partner of R9 in the accountancy field contributed to becoming a *"smart farmer"* (R9). According to the interviewee, his work experience provided him with the right assets to deeply understand the financial and administrative part of the family business. Specific former or current work experiences outside agriculture may thus foster a more entrepreneurial attitude of organic farmers.

### Farmer characteristics: flexible attitudes

Next to the enhancement of entrepreneurial attitudes, the data show that multiple organic farmers with work experience outside the farming sector consider themselves rather flexible and innovative. As an illustration, the previous work experience of interviewee R7 in plant breeding strengthened the investigative component of her professional identity. *"I say we are always into something crazy (laughing). There is always something, yes, to try"* (R7). Although she sometimes received negative reactions from her social environment - *"we are not an experimental farm"* - this way of working determines her professional identity. Having worked somewhere else also provides in general a degree of certainty and enables farmers to make more risky farm related choices. *"But that's also because of our background, we can always take a job"* (R1). *"Yes, I am not stuck. And that's really because of studying and working into other circles"* (R2). Non-agrarian work experience can thus be considered a driver for more flexible attitudes.

### Farmer characteristics: changing (world) views

The role of past or present work experience also becomes visible in how these farmers perceive reality, the world, and ultimately farming itself. Having worked outside the farm provided interviewees with a highly welcome period of 'distance', in which they could think about the more fundamental aspects of farming. *"And I think for me that has really been very enriching, that you both have been doing completely different things for about 10 years. I also think that if we hadn't, we wouldn't have the business we have now"* (R2). For example, during the years that the partner of an interviewee worked at a department of Wageningen University, *"he was very much able to give meaning to his vision and view on things"* (R4). For interviewee R4 herself, the time spent working on a biodynamic company in another European country has seriously changed her thinking on agriculture and the role of a farmer.

Special attention should be paid to work experience that interviewees gained abroad. When asking how those job experiences may have impacted their professional identity, they argued it primarily influenced their world views. As the partner of R11b - who has former work experience in the development sector in several African countries - answers to that question: *"No, not being a farmer, but being a human. And your world view"*. Working abroad broadened interviewees' perspectives. *"The earth is bigger than what you can see for yourself. And you have experienced that firsthand. On the other side of the earth, people are also doing much the same thing in different ways, but you are all part of that system, even if you don't know each other"* (R11a). Similarly, the work experience of R1 and her partner in different places in the world fostered the urge to make a difference as farmers regarding global environmental and social issues.



## 5.3 The impact on farm development trajectories

### Estimating opportunities for the future

The former section analyzed how non-agrarian work experience impacts organic farmers' professional identities through specific self-perceptions and certain attitudes. Furthermore, work experience outside agriculture is of crucial importance given its effect on further farm development trajectories. Non-agrarian work experience influences how interviewees perceive opportunities and obstacles regarding their farm futures. These perceptions belong to a professional identity as they refer to the abilities organized around a particular professional role (Eliot & Turns, 2011).

For instance, the former job of an interviewee in the landscape planning sector makes her more hesitant towards certain developments aimed at nature conservation. According to this interviewee, "extreme" nature development is not only financially infeasible, but also less preferred than when such projects are carried out on a larger scale (R1). This idea of achieving change together results from their – her partner too - previous office work experiences. *"Well then you have people who go into politics for that, while what I saw there is much more: no, it starts here. If I knock someone over, if everyone else does, then I'm fine. If every farmer would say; I will become organic and in my circle I will tell you why that is important, then it will go much faster. I now believe much more strongly in the crowd to get it done"* (R1).

In the same light, for R3 the development path of benefitting extra income through providing green-blue services seems attractive and fits her professional agrarian identity. However, according to this interviewee the system is not properly arranged yet. R3 has gained a lot of experience with the concept of indemnification through her current job as legal advisor. She therefore argues that the provision of green-blue services must be based on a new revenue model and not on the basis of compensation. *"Because it fits very well with our way of life and how we want to do our business, but it has to be more than just compensation"* (R3). Hence her non-agrarian work experience does exclude the choice for certain development trajectories.

External work experiences might also translate to more practical benefits or opportunities for the farm. As the interviewee with a job as legal advisor states about arranging permits: *"Yes it is only a small effort to arrange it for yourself. So that was just really nice that you had that knowledge and could arrange that well and sat on top of it. Because we are close to Natura 2000 and otherwise we would have had a real problem"* (R3). For this specific case, her non-agrarian job partly ensured their farm future and thus affects the development trajectory of their farm.

### Driver for initiating new activities

The way in which non-agrarian work experience impacts organic farmers' perceptions on the future of their farms is perhaps most clearly reflected through the introduction – or absence – of certain activities. Indeed, the interview data show that many of the motives behind the introduction of specific new activities can be linked to previous or current work experience of the partners on farm involved. For instance, the work experience of an interviewee in the hospitality industry formed the main reason to initiate a recreation branch on farm (R10). Similarly, the hospitality component that was part of an interviewee's job as a maternity nurse, made her initiate guided tours on the family farm (R6a). Specifically regarding guided tours, professional backgrounds of multiple interviewees in the education sector spurred the introduction of educational related activities on farm.

Indeed, the effect of a job outside the farming sector is relevant, as some newly introduced activities become of a great importance – not only financially - for the family farm. The recreational branch initiated by R10 has evolved into a thriving apartment rental business, which is not inferior to the agrarian branch. Similarly, both interviewed partners argue that the side job of R11a at a butchery during her teenage years has had major impact on the character of the farm shop she initiated. *“I think that that has shaped our farm shop indeed. Yes, it is a second branch next to the horticulture, that meat was something... and I did not do any training in that but a lot of work experience”* (R11a). Meanwhile, their farm shop has also become more professional and has grown into a pivotal anchor of their farm business.

Interestingly, the effect of non-agrarian work experience does not have to be visible immediately. Many interviewees stress that they started to introduce new activities when they had more time and resources, and when their help was less needed with agrarian activities. For instance, one interviewee – currently working as a therapist - ponders to set up a so-called living group on the farm where young and elderly live together, as she notices serious loneliness under her clients. Since some activities might only be realized in the future, the influence of non-agrarian work experience on farm development trajectories and its blending capacity have been underestimated, but the data from this research clearly show the relevant impact it can have.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed the role of non-agrarian work experience by centralizing the impact on professional identities and on farm development trajectories. It showed that work experience outside agriculture should be considered a crucial factor in the construction and diversity of professional identities. Based on the high degree of non-agrarian work experience among organic interviewees, the idea of multiple identities applies to many organic family farms. This chapter shows there are tentative indications that non-agrarian work experience may be an expression of a blending mechanism that manifests itself over time. These blending tendencies are both reflected in farmers entrepreneurial or flexible attitudes and changing (world) views, as well as in the perception of opportunities and obstacles, and the uptake of new activities. The next chapter will further elaborate on this notion of blended identities by exploring the blending of professional identities between partners.

## 6. Farm-Family Internal Blending Mechanisms

### Introduction: the importance of incorporating blended identities

Chapter 4 has outlined diversifying perceptions on the scope of farming, farmer roles and the meaning of organic among the organic farmers community. However, little attention has been paid to intrahousehold diversity and dynamics. Crucially, different backgrounds of partners are of importance, especially given the impact of non-agrarian work experience on farmers' professional identities, as described in the previous chapter. The question rises to what extent these professional identities are further affected by the presence, interaction, and blending of multiple people and professional identities.

As outlined before, this research has focused on female interviewees who identify themselves to a greater or lesser extent with the farm. Hence it is likely to assume that these interviewees have an impact on farm operations and preferred development trajectories. Although not all female interviewees express a strong professional agrarian identity, they have agency to participate in decision-making processes and consequently impact farm development trajectories. It is thus essential to analyze the idea of blended professional identities from a broader, more inclusive, perspective.

Attention should be paid to how multiple identities come together in the unique and context-specific dynamics of an organic Dutch family farm. Hence this chapter elaborates on the notion of blended identities by analyzing a second blending mechanism, one that manifests itself as the outcome of interaction between partners on farm. Accordingly, this chapter answers the last research question, namely to what extent diversifying professional identities in the organic sector can be explained by the notion of blended professional identities. Since the interviews illustrate that this blending process takes place in various forms, this chapter starts with a discussion of tensions between professional identities and co-evolving professional identities.

### 6.1 Tensions between professional identities

Both individual and joint interviews reveal a glimpse of the distinct self-perceptions between partners. The following quote illustrates this clearly: *"Anyway, my partner is from the two us for the most part 'farmer' [...] I feel more like a green entrepreneur, or in the countryside, and if I were only a farmer, I would also partly nullify the recreation part, while that also just ensures that we can have a farm as we have it now. So, more entrepreneur, but really green-oriented or rural-oriented"* (R2). Similarly, interviewee R5b identifies as an entrepreneur in the countryside while his partner considers herself primarily a farmer. Consequently, partners do not always share the same preferences towards future farm orientations. While R11b acknowledges the educational role of a farmer, it is not likely that corresponding activities will be introduced in the future since his partner indicates: *"well that doesn't suit me"* (R11a). And vice versa too, as R11a states: *"The same with care tasks, I don't object to that so much, but I know that is not okay with [partner]"*. Indeed, everyone experiences their profession and inherently their farm futures in different ways, and *"partners may face different obstacles regarding their farm futures"* (R6a).

The following quote illustrate how these different perceptions and preferences between partners may also lead to tensions between farmers' professional identities. For instance, R4 leans more towards multifunctionality than her partner, which makes it sometimes difficult for both partners to find a balance between all activities present on farm. *"There are big tractors, and there are men in overalls, so you can sometimes get the*

*feeling that it is the most important thing. And it is, because cultivation has to continue, and the farming business is simply the carrier of all the other things we do. But at the same time, I know that if I didn't do these things that way, our company probably wouldn't even be here anymore"* (R4). Specific aspects of their professional identities do not necessarily blend, or co-exist well. Indeed, this blending process between partners may not always go smoothly, and can be accompanied by fields of tension between partners' different professional identities.

## **6.2 Co-evolving professional identities**

It is indisputable that organic farmers – and their partners - perceive their professional identity in various ways. Although these differences between partners might lead to frictions, multiple interviewees recognize how distinct professional identities co-evolve within a family farm. As an illustration, R3 argues that the education and workshop activities they currently have on farm, which were initiated by the interviewee, are still primarily her responsibility: *"No, but I don't really see him telling workshop participants how to prepare a piece of meat. That's really my thing and not so much from him"* (R3). Or, as another interviewee with an educational background mentions about the guided tours: *"No, [partner] always says; ooh that's what [interviewee] is for (laughing)"* (R8). Similarly, during the interview, R6b mentioned *"and [partner]'s guided tours"*, which indicates that it is not quite his thing yet. Distinct professional identities are thus present on farm, but do not necessarily need to clash or blend into a common professional identity.

However, a specific task division between partners is not a precise, or the only, indicator for the extent and the way in which this blending takes shape. It makes sense in practical terms to divide tasks and responsibilities, especially given the family farm context. Some tasks might fit one partner better than the other, but that does not necessarily imply that partners do not share a similar professional identity. *"I will also look at which plant we buy, and he also looks at which group I can give a tour or what I can still do. So we also do it together. It is not... of course that is his main branch, the garden, and for me the main branch is the non-agrarian activities but in the end it is also something of the two of us"* (R6).

Indeed, almost all interviewees argue that a clear task division is necessary, especially when the farm is extended with multiple branches or activities. However, some of these branches might evolve into pivotal branches of the farm business. For example, the recreation branch of R10 – spurred by her non-agrarian work experience - became so successful that they formally decided to split the business into a recreation branch and a farm. Hence both partners are not only responsible for one branch, but also identify themselves with 'their own' branch. In this specific case, blending over time through non-agrarian work experience has in a sense transcended and prevented the idea of blending through interaction between partners. Instead of blending, these professional identities co-evolve in almost separate spheres.

Similarly, R4 states: *"But then there was a bit of a separation, in the sense that the whole, yes actually everything related to education and the excursions, public on the farm; I do that for 90 percent and [partner] for 10 percent."* (R4). It is important to explore to what extent blended professional identities have the space to appear in a specific context. Hence multiple branches on farm and consequently a strict task division between partners might - instead of fostering blended professional identities - lead to co-evolving professional identities.

## 6.3 Blended professional identities

### Blending: complementarity in skills and qualities

Besides the notion of tensions between professional identities and co-evolving professional identities, the interview data provide clear indications for blended professional identities as the outcome of the interaction between partners. First of all, organic farmers' varying personal traits, competencies, and farming styles may have a complementary effect. While R1 is more short-term oriented, her partner is more focused on exploring opportunities in the long term. Another interviewee agrees: *"I am not very good at spending money and [partner] can do that more professionally. I always say, [partner] can look at that, he has a long-term vision, he also involves the world in that. And I already like it when I have done my work again this week. [...] In this way we complement each other"* (R11a). Or as quoted by R2: *"We are both different type of people in that sense. He is a doer and first does something and then thinks, and I'm just the other way around. That keeps each other in balance. [...] It is good that we differ from each other in that sense. I can sometimes use a little more speed and he sometimes has to use the handbrake for a while"* (R2). These quotes clearly show that this blending mechanism between partners is also about integrating diverse, but complementary, professional identities.

### Blending: opening up for other ways of doing

This complementarity in skills and qualities is also expressed in opening up for other ways of doing. Interviewee R2 highlights how she and her partner influence each other's train of thoughts, from which a shared and collective agrarian mindset flows out. As an illustration, interviewee R10 mentions how the opening of their farm for the wider public altered her partner's professional identity. While in the beginning the remark *"all those people at the company, what are you supposed to do with it?"* showed the aversion of her partner towards the recreational and educational activities she initiated, he is now very willing to arrange guided tours. She argues how he has become more open, welcoming, and adopted a different perception of being a farmer. Hence R10's openness of her professional identity blended with the professional identity of her partner.

Interestingly, components of R10 partner's professional identity have in turn also blended with hers. In contrast to this interviewee, her partner grew up on a small-scale and rather ecological farm – *"they didn't spray, and we sprayed every little weed so to speak"* (R10). Although in the beginning she was quite skeptical to adopt such a working method and adjust her image of what a farm should look like, she now argues how it changed her professional identity. Indeed, opinions and perceptions farmers gained through their childhood or upbringing are of importance for blended professional identities too.

In the same way as former work experience played an essential role in the blended identities of R10 and her partner, so does the current job of interviewee R9 as holistic therapist influence their common agrarian identity, and thus the farm itself. A thorough holistic vision lies not only at the basis of her work as therapist, but is strongly interwoven with the entire company. Hence this vision is of major importance for the professional identity of the interviewee and her partner (R9). *"But that dynamic side, that holistic vision of everything that lives, - because my practice is also focused on that, but I am more focused on the human side and [partner] more on the animal side and agriculture - but we very much believe in the transparency, in the small-scale, in holistic, so that things influence each other, in a positive and in a negative sense, and that you have to move along with that"* (R9). Hence we can conclude that the blending of identities can be related to an opening up of visions and therefore impact farm development trajectories.

### Blending: indications for blending in time

Lastly, this blending mechanism does not manifest immediately, but is a process that takes shape over time. This is illustrated by the quote of interviewee R6: *“Especially for [partner] because I was completely behind my thing, but for [partner] that was still a switch. Of course he was never used to anything other than a production company. And we felt a bit like it had to be different, and he also understood that, only yes that has to grow so to speak”* (R6). Similarly, although the partner of R1 preferred to quit dairy farming and convert the farm, for many years the interviewee was not ready for this transition. Milking cows was still too important for her professional identity as farmer. Interestingly, in the beginning of her farming career this same interviewee had nothing to do with organic farming, even though her partner immediately indicated he did not want to farm conventionally. *“But he had that very strong, I don't believe in the usual way, I also don't believe in just bigger and simple milking”* (R1). Her partner was therefore the motivation to switch to organic farming, something R1 came to value later on and which she now determines as crucial identity factor. Indeed, just as single professional identities are dynamic, so are blended professional identities, and their impact on farm development trajectories may manifest years later.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored another mechanism of blended professional identities, one that manifests itself as the outcome of (and through the process of) interaction between partners on family farms. First of all, the blending of professional identities takes shape within the boundaries of a family setting and is also acknowledged by interviewees as such, although it sometimes may take time to clearly manifest itself. Simultaneously, this blending mechanism makes clear how blending may also be accompanied by tensions between distinct professional identities of partners or co-evolving professional identities. Hence this chapter has shown the multiple aspects that foster or diminish the space for blending between partners to take shape on Dutch organic family farms.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1 Analysis

Chapter 3 already mentioned the aim of this research, which reads: *“gaining an understanding of diversifying professional identities on Dutch organic family farms and its impact on farm orientations by exploring the role of non-agrarian work experience and the interaction of multiple professional identities.”* The answers to the sub-questions as analyzed in the results chapters have provided real and relevant insights into the crucial role of non-agrarian work experience and the interaction of multiple professional identities regarding a diverse landscape of professional identities. Work experience outside agriculture does not solely impact professional identities, but interviews point out how it can also be considered a driver for new farm activities. This corresponds with the findings of Oostindië: *“Other family farm specificities appear in the importance attached to earlier work experience outside agriculture in relation to the uptake of new farm activities”* (2015, p.72). The fact that these non-agrarian work experiences impact farmers professional agrarian identities, supports the idea of a blending mechanism, which manifests itself over time. The previous chapter indicates that blended professional identities do not only take shape through non-agrarian work experience, but are also fostered by a blending mechanism that results from the interaction between partners involved.

After all, the notions of professional identities and development trajectories are extremely intertwined: blended professional identities translate themselves – in multiple ways and to a greater and lesser extent - into diversifying farm development trajectories. The idea of blended identities is therefore crucial to understand the dynamics within organic agriculture. Hence the hypothesis described in the Introduction turned out to be very true: (blended) professional identities in farming is a highly complex, dynamic, and fuzzy concept. How interviewees perceive their professional identity does not always match with the reality, or better to say: the reality I perceived as researcher. For instance, a farmer working on a dairy farm stated, *“I don’t feel like a dairy farmer”* (R1), and an interviewee with an education branch mentioned that *“we are not an education farm”* (R8). The following quote stresses this fuzzy character once again: *“everyone [in the organic sector] has their own identity”* (R10).

Crucially, when examining professional identities, other interactions than just blending mechanisms should be incorporated, as the interview data also point to tensions between professional identities and co-evolving professional identities.

### 7.2 Reflections

#### Usability of theoretical framework

Usually, the discussion places its main findings in a broader scientific context and compares them with findings of other authors. Given the strong explorative character of this research, existing agrarian literature on - blended - professional identities in agriculture is limited. Consequently, different than other theoretical frameworks used in thesis reports, this theoretical framework has been drawn up as a theoretical debate that problematizes the idea of a single, fixed, professional identity in an agrarian family farming context. Despite the questions that certain concepts in this framework may raise (as will be discussed in the next paragraphs), the theoretical framework has been very useful to explore the notion of diversifying professional identities and possible

explanatory factors. The focus on two blending mechanisms, as defined in the theoretical framework, helped to structure the findings in a logical matter. Hence this research has showed the potential of a blended identities approach - which should therefore not be excluded from the rural sciences.

### **Conceptual limitations: professional identity salience**

As mentioned before, gaining an understanding of the concept of professional identities is highly complex. Indeed, whether interviewees express, or stress, certain components of their professional identity is largely determined by the specific situation or social environment. For example, when a biodynamic interviewee joined a large group of conventional farmers for political purposes to The Hague, she was quite hesitant to express that she owns a biodynamic farm. Importantly, this is not a single phenomenon, since other farmers declare their restraint in stressing a part of their professional identity in both offline and online situations as well. These findings correspond with what Stryker & Burke (2000, p.290) refer to as 'identity salience', which has been outlined in the theoretical framework. However, in this research setting farmers were relatively free to reflect upon their professional farming identities. The fact that interviewees were aware of the confidentiality precautions might have contributed to their open stance. Hence the negative effect of identity salience on this research can be considered negligible.

### **Conceptual limitations: boundaries of non-agrarian work experience**

While the concept of non-agrarian work experience took a central place in this research, the data showed that the idea of work experience outside agriculture in relation to professional identities is not as evident as it may seem at first glance. Interviewees' professional backgrounds are diverse: not only in sectoral terms, but these work experiences also range from small side jobs in the past to current serious careers. This generates two points of attention focused on the boundaries of non-agrarian work experience.

Firstly, many interviewees indicated to have both previous and current work experience next to their farming occupation, but often in fields closely related to the agricultural sector. For instance, an interviewee worked as a consultant at a company in Wageningen, where she executed many projects aimed at convincing farmers to convert to organic. Furthermore, the partner of an interviewee worked as marketing director in the agri-food sector. Nonetheless, interviewees argue that these work experiences regarding working in a team, coping with different opinions etcetera, are still crucial for their current professional identity as farmer. I thus believe that work experience in fields relating to agriculture may still have the potential to foster different professional identities and simultaneously impact perceptions of being a farmer.

Secondly, non-agrarian work experiences of interviewees are not limited to conventional, paid wage jobs. Multiple interviewees – with or without other work experience outside agriculture – have participated in several boards of organizations or political parties. Again, these board functions were often strongly linked to the agricultural sector (regional milk association, Rabobank agricultural investment board, general agricultural cooperation). In order to keep the scope of this thesis manageable, only paid work experiences have been incorporated, but that does not imply that other non-agrarian 'work' experiences are irrelevant.



## Methodological choices & limitations

One of the biggest challenges regarding the research design for this thesis was the choice for joint or single interviews. Taking into consideration the ongoing methodological debate on interviewing couples together or separately, and the connected (dis)advantages, this research predominantly made use of single interviews (Valentine, 1999; Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014; Hertz, 1995). A single interview often provides the interviewee with more freedom to express their individual opinions and perceptions on the topic (Valentine, 1999). Especially since the interviews took place online, joint couple interviews could have created an extra (practical) barrier for some. However, the insights that the three joint interviews gained, should not be underestimated. Non-verbal expressions and the interaction between partners yielded much input for Chapter 4 + 6.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was not allowed to conduct all interviews live. Preferably, I would have combined these interviews with farm visits, in order to also get a sense of the farm environment. Although nine interviews were held 'online' and two 'offline', I do not recognize remarkable differences in the output of these interviews. The use of video platforms made the interviews livelier and enabled me to still witness non-verbal expressions.

## 7.3 Recommendations

### Research recommendations

In this research little attention has been paid to generational differences in diversifying professional identities among organic farmers. Yet multiple interviewees express how they perceive a shift in professional identities between older and younger generations of farmers. For instance, manual weeding might be embarrassing for the older generation (since their identity is often based on agro-industrial logics), but young farmers are increasingly interested in the benefits of this technique. Furthermore, young farmers have become more open to the wider public and acknowledge the educational role that accompanies with the profession of farming. Given the fact that the younger generation in particular plays a crucial role in farm development trajectories, further research on generational variety in professional identities is highly recommended.

Secondly, this research predominantly focused on two blending mechanisms: the role of non-agrarian work experience and the interaction between partners on a family farm. It was beyond the scope of this research, but the interviews indicated that solely focusing on the interaction between partners is insufficient to completely explore the idea of blended professional identities on family farms. In most cases, children also engage in decision-making processes and have their own perceptions on the profession of farming. In other words: they co-construct a farm identity and thus impact development trajectories. Besides that, multiple interviews point to the ongoing influence of parents or parents-in-law after a family farm take-over. Hence it is crucial to further explore the interaction with both children and predecessors as a possible mechanism of intergenerational blended professional identities.

### Policy recommendations

Since this research reveals a great diversity in professional identities among organic farmers, speaking of 'the organic farmer' ignores the specific interpretation of their farming identity. However, this varying group of farmers is often considered a homogeneous group. Not only by society, but interviewees argue that governments also draw up generic policy based on one fixed way of farming or agrarian identity. Therefore,

diverse professional identities are not always acknowledged. The plan of an interviewee to start a recreation and educational branch in the early 1990's was opposed by local governments. Permits for activities other than food production were not issued, while these activities were crucial for the professional agrarian identities of both interviewees involved.

Ultimately, since agrarian family farms - and in particular organic farms - have the capacity to respond to changing societal demands regarding the future of Dutch agriculture, paying attention to changing gender roles and professional identities is thus highly recommended. Agricultural policies should therefore be adjusted to the farm specifics and recognize expressions of blended professional identities of the farmers involved.

## 8. Conclusion

With the aim of properly concluding this study, this section formulates an answer to the main research question, which reads: *to which degree do we witness diversifying professional identities in the Dutch organic sector?* In order to do so, first the result chapters will be summarized, which answer the three sub-questions of this research. Accordingly, these sub-questions focused on 1) *the key differences in professional identities among Dutch organic farmers*, 2) *the role of non-agrarian work experience in relation to the construction of a professional identity*, and 3) *the extent to which these key differences can be explained by the blending of professional identities between partners within family farming*.

Chapter 4, which aimed to answer the first research question, highlighted the scope of farming, farmer roles and the meaning of organic as three key differences in organic farmers' professional identities. Interviews have shown that perceptions on these interrelated topics highly differ. In turn, these key differences in professional agrarian identities are also strongly connected to the ideas of farmers regarding specific development trajectories.

An analysis of the second sub-question, as outlined in Chapter 5, stresses that non-agrarian work should be considered a crucial factor in the construction and diversification of professional identities. Work experience outside agriculture impacts farmers' characteristics, attitudes and worldviews. Combined with the finding that these non-agrarian work experiences function as a driving force for the initiation of activities, its impact on farm development trajectories should not be neglected. These are all indications for a first blending mechanism of professional identities, namely those connected to work experience outside agriculture.

The last result chapter, Chapter 6, elaborated on the notion of blended identities by analyzing a second blending mechanism, one that manifests itself as the outcome of interaction between partners on farm. Data show that this blending process does not always have to take place however, as tendencies of tensions or co-evolving professional identities may diminish the space for blended professional identities. However, when blending does take place the impact on the partners' professional identities and hence on the farm character is substantial.

These three chapters have gained crucial insights into various concepts in relation to professional agrarian identities, and hence offered the means to answer the overall research question. This research has therefore provided new insights into underlying mechanisms of diversifying professional identities among Dutch organic farmers by exploring and describing various expressions of professional identity blending. Although perhaps in certain ways a somewhat fuzzy concept, blended professional identities is simultaneously an interesting and promising notion to further explore and understand ongoing differentiation tendencies in agriculture regarding its underlying driving forces, particularly (although not exclusively) in family farming settings.

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## Appendix

### 1. Annex: Interview table

	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Place</i>
<b>R1</b>	1:25:26	21 January 2021	Live
<b>R2</b>	1:50:11	22 January 2021	WhatsApp videocall
<b>R3</b>	54:27	25 January 2021	Phone call
<b>R4</b>	1:12:27	27 January 2021	Microsoft Teams
<b>R5a</b>	1:18:47	28 January 2021	Microsoft Teams
<b>R5b</b>			
<b>R6a</b>	1:30:00	8 February 2021	Microsoft Teams
<b>R6b</b>			
<b>R7</b>	45:57	9 February 2021	Microsoft Teams
<b>R8</b>	1:40:23	10 February 2021	Microsoft Teams
<b>R9</b>	1:20:12	1 March 2021	Microsoft Teams
<b>R10</b>	1:03:36	2 March 2021	Phone call
<b>R11a</b>	2:03:09	15 March 2021	Live
<b>R11b</b>			

### 2. Annex: Interview topic list

Since I already had access to information regarding interviewees' farm identification, development perspectives and work experience, I have been able to create specific interviews questions and topic lists targeted on the individual interviewees in advance. Considering traceability and anonymity issues, only a general topic overview will be listed below.

<i>1. Introduction</i>	
1.1	Summary survey
1.2	Check results
1.3	Explanation on the research
<i>2. Self-identification</i>	
2.1	What is a farmer
2.2	Good farming
2.3	Family farming
2.4	Organic farming
2.5	Farm characteristics and activities
2.6	General agrarian identity
2.7	Farming background
<i>3. Development perspectives</i>	

3.1	Perceptions on (un)preferred perspectives
3.2	Part-time farming
3.3	Multifunctionality
3.4	Business dynamics
3.5	Agrarian income
3.6	Opportunities and threats
3.7	Other farm futures
<i>4. Family farm dynamics</i>	
4.1	Task division
4.2	Initiating activities
4.3	Responsibility of farm tasks
4.4	Decision-making processes
4.5	Staff-members
4.6	Role of other family members on farm
<i>5. Possible blending mechanisms</i>	
5.1	Educational background
5.2	Former work experiences interviewee (agrarian and non-agrarian)
5.3	Current non-agrarian work experiences interviewee
5.4	Former work experiences partner (agrarian and non-agrarian)
5.5	Current non-agrarian work experiences partner
5.6	Impact of non-agrarian work experience
5.7	Interaction with partner
5.8	Interaction with other farmers

### 3. Annex: Coding tree

See next page

