

MSc Thesis

Heterogeneity of Dutch farmer identities in times of crisis and transition

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ABSTRACT

Present day agricultural practices in the Netherlands are creating large-scale damage to the environment. Despite the strong need for collaboration between farmers and other stakeholders to resolve agriculture related problems, farmer communities in the Netherlands are increasingly entering into defensive attitudes, antagonizing governmental institutions and environmental organizations. This thesis departs from the notion that for an improved alignment between farmers and other stakeholders that exert influence on the future of the agricultural system, a better understanding is needed about what moves farmers, about their cognitions and perceptions, their meaning making lenses, about how they perceive themselves and their roles in the world, and to who they feel related in which ways. From a social constructivist perspective, these aspects are shaped through the process of identification. This thesis contributes to deepen the reader's understanding about how the process of identification influences Dutch farmers' collective attitudes towards the sustainability transition by 1. exploring which social contexts influence their identities and how, 2. studying the narratives that reveal what drives collectivity within farming communities and 3. by abstracting four ideal typical categories of Dutch farmers which are connected to one another through shared meanings and intersubjectivity around the topic of the sustainability transition in farming.

This was done on the basis of an identity-based framework which made it possible to point out the coherence within an extensive empirical dataset wherein an attempt was made to grasp the less factual aspects of identity (such as emotions, sentiments, attitudes and so on) alongside with the understandings and cognitions that dominate social networks of farmers. A grounded theory approach guided the process of narrative and content analysis from social media platforms, secondary information sources and interviews with agricultural experts.

Farmers in the Netherlands are connected to one another through various groups and social networks, ranging from formal to informal, and from local to national. There are many forms of interaction, and facilitating structures that shape the social contexts of farmers in the Netherlands. The Dutch agricultural sector is characterized by strong embedding in family structures and associated values and practices. Furthermore, Dutch farming communities were found to have a strong embedding in larger structures like agri-food firms and cooperatives, and that of interest organizations that stir the direction of the agricultural system.

Social media networks of farmers are dominated by narratives that portray farmers as victims of framing by perversely motivated environmentally-oriented antagonists of the agricultural sector, alongside with farming promotion campaigns as an attempt to un-frame or re-frame farmers. Disputation of facts and figures dominate societal discussions about environmental problems related to agriculture in the Netherlands. It is hypothesized that the *nitrogen crisis* has increased the salience of resistance, anti-environmental, and anti-governmental social identities amongst farmer communities, giving rise to collective identities that engage in direct political action.

The landscape of Dutch farmers was subdivided into four ideal typical categories. Attitudes towards the sustainability transition, associated narratives, and other identity traits that drive intersubjectivity were used to typify these four social categories of farmers. Coherence was found among cognitions, emotions, values, meanings, and perceptions of in and out groups that shape the social identities of the four categories: *Resisting farmers*, *Awaiting farmers*, *Orienting farmers*, and *Pioneering farmers*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	III
Abstract	IV
Table of contents.....	V
1 Introduction	1
2 Analytical Framework.....	5
2.1 SDM, opportunity identification and farming styles.....	5
2.2 Symbolic Interactionism.....	7
2.3 Identities and the Self-Concept.....	8
2.4 Defining groups, social networks and communities	11
3 Methodology.....	13
3.1 Grounded theory.....	13
3.2 Data collection methods	14
3.3 Data analysis	16
3.4 Theory formation	17
4 Results	19
4.1 Describing farmers' contextuality and the process of socio-cultural embedding	19
4.2 Farmer narratives: shared values, meanings, attitudes, sentiments and cognitions about farming and being a farmer in times of transition	26
4.3 Synthesis: four attitudes towards the sustainability transition	46
5 Discussion.....	57
5.1 SRQ1: Which social networks affect the identities of Dutch farmers and how can their influence be characterized?	57
5.2 SRQ2. Which shared values, meanings, attitudes, sentiments and cognitions about farming and being a farmer drive collectivity within farming communities?	60
5.3 SRQ3: How can the landscape of Dutch farmers be categorized on the basis of collective attitudes towards the sustainability transition?	61
5.4 Reflection on methods and research design.....	67
6 Conclusions	71
References.....	73
Appendixes	77
Appendix 1. Aspects of difference	77
Appendix 2. Positionality of interest organizations	79

1 INTRODUCTION

Humanity is exceeding, or about to surpass various planetary boundaries, and agriculture plays a significant role in that. Nutrient pollution, biodiversity loss, freshwater use and land-system change are predominantly linked to agricultural production, which also plays significant a role in climate change (Campbell et al., 2017). The effects of climate change are already observable: biodiversity loss caused mainly by land-use change, habitat fragmentation, and pollution is leading to a mass extinction of species which threatens the habitability of this planet (UNEP, 2016). In the Netherlands, the intensification of agriculture has contributed to the disappearance of wide variety of protected species in the past decennia (CBS, 2020; CLO, 2020). Over half of protected species and habitats are being threatened in the Netherlands, not reaching the necessary population numbers to ensure healthy ecosystems (CLO, 2020). Nutrient pollution of surface water, drought, acidification, and nitrogen deposition are the main drivers for nature degradation in the Netherlands (CLO, 2016). Nevertheless, agriculture continues to contribute to around 15% of greenhouse gas emissions in the Netherlands (Van Eerd, 2019) and over half of gaseous nitrogen emissions in the form of NH_3 and NO_x (RIVM, 2020). Despite claims that the Dutch have the most 'environmentally efficient' agriculture, it seems that the excessive amounts of nutrient pollution and habitat degradation in the Netherlands will not be solved if Dutch farmers continue business as usual.

On global, European (EU), national, and regional levels these issues are prominent in political debates and have led to agreements, strategies and collaborations aiming to pave a road towards the reduction of environmental degradation, while simultaneously achieving food security. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) intend to provide some top-down guidance (FAO, 2020; United Nations Climate Change, 2020) towards sustainable food systems. On the European Union level, the Farm to Fork strategy was put in place to look at integral solutions (European Commission, 2020). On a national level the Dutch ministry has presented a vision on circular agriculture to give guidance to a transition of the Dutch food system (Ministerie van LNV, 2018). Although these initiatives bear witness of some necessary leadership and some top-down action to facilitate systemic change, changing agricultural paradigms remains difficult for leaders on all levels. Not only are political arenas divided on the topic and interest-driven (Hofs, 2019; Schmidt, 2020), but often incoherence is found between policy-level transitions and bottom-up change (Burton & Wilson, 2006; Hakkenes, 2018)

Transition towards a more durable food system in the Netherlands can only be reached through alignment of top-down and bottom-up objectives, in conjunction with alignment of stakeholders in society, such as NGO's, agri-food professionals, and consumers, and most importantly farmers, who can help bring about societal change. Farmers affect the future of our agricultural system in two ways; firstly through the way they manage their farms, by their farm development strategies, and secondly, (some farmers more than others) through political action. Dutch farmers seem to have little trust in the government and feel badly represented by farmer unions, leading to the formation of farmer activist groups and large farmer protests (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019a, 2019b; Bouma, Marijnissen, & Van der Ploeg, 2020; Meindertsmas, 2020; Velzen, 2019). In May 2019, the Dutch government was sued by an environmental organization due to incoherence between the European Habitat Directive and the Dutch Nitrogen Emissions Program (PAS), resulting in the national *nitrogen crisis*, wherein all pending license applications in construction and agriculture had to be rejected or put on hold (Candel, 2019). Besides having large economic impacts, it kick-started massive farmer protests all over the country (Candel, 2019), downgraded the credibility of the Dutch government and led to even more polarization

between environmental organizations, the government, urban citizens and farmer groups (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019a; Bouma et al., 2020).

To improve the alignment between farmers and society it is relevant to increase our understanding about what drives farmers in both of the aforementioned pathways of influence on the agricultural system (choosing development pathways on their farms and direct political action). Choices in farm development are influenced by many factors, some of them exogenous (outside circumstances) and others endogenous (driving motives from within the farmer him- or herself). According to Methorst (2016) the extent to which these exogenous factors affect farm development is also, to a large extent, subjective. Methorst (2016) says that the farmers perception of exogenous factors is more influential on farm development than the actual exogenous factors themselves. However according to Methorst (2016) the endogenous factors, *views and preferences* as he names them, are at least as important in determining farmers' *strategic decision making* (SDM), and according to him these factors need further investigation. Endogenous drivers also play an important role when farmers influence the agricultural system through political action. This thesis therefore departs from the notion that for an improved alignment between farmers and other stakeholders that exert influence on the future of the agricultural system, a better understanding is needed about what moves farmers, their cognitions and perceptions, their meaning making lenses, how they perceive themselves and their roles in the world. Farmer's identities, and the process of identification largely influence endogenous drivers and the perception of exogenous drivers of the individual farmer, indicating why the identities of farmers are the main topic of interest in this study. The aim of this research is:

To deepen our understanding about how the process of identification influences Dutch farmers' attitudes towards the sustainability transition anno 2019-2021.

In this thesis, a social constructivist point of view was used to learn about endogenous drivers, and more specifically the *self-concepts* and *identities* of farmers. Through this lens, the *personal* is actually not so *personal* anymore, for from a social constructivist point of view the individual and society are *twinborn*; "One has no identity apart from society; one has no individuality apart from identity" (Owens 2006, p. 216 cited Cooley 1902, p.21). The self-concept, as described by Stryker's identity theory (Stryker in Owens, 2006), is constituted of multiple identities at the same time whereby each one of these identities is formed through the process of identification with a certain group (Owens, 2006). From this perspective, in order to understand farmer's self-concepts and identities, one must learn about the groups with which farmers identify themselves. Therefore, the first research question for this thesis is:

SRQ1: Which social networks affect the identities of Dutch farmers and how can their influence be characterized?

Farmers within these social networks are connected to one another through *intersubjectivity*; they share meanings, understandings, emotions, sentiments, and definitions of reality, -of present-day situations, -of the role of farmers in society. They do this through language, through the sharing of *narratives*. The process of identification with a social network can be seen as the adoption of these intersubjectivities into one's own self-concept (Owens, 2006). By analysing narratives about farming and being a farmer that are shared within these social networks we can learn about this intersubjectivity, and we can understand what the identities of farmers entail. Hence, the second research question was formulated:

SRQ2. Which shared values, meanings, attitudes, sentiments and cognitions about farming and being a farmer drive collectivity within farming communities?

It is important to consider that the farming population in the Netherlands is diverse and heterogeneous (Van der Ploeg, 2020). Therefore, in order to involve farmers with the sustainability transition in a more targeted way, it is helpful to learn about this heterogeneity in the farming socio-cultural landscape. Of course, all individual farmers are unique at a personal level. However, around the theme of transition there are some dominant narratives within farming communities around which social identities, and in some cases collective identities, have emerged. These narratives do not only shape farmers' personal identities, but also influence society when becoming a political voice. Some narratives cohere with one another, and together these cohering narratives can be used to describe social categories that shape the socio-cultural landscape of farmer identities in the light of transition. On the basis of attitudes towards change, a categorization of this socio-cultural landscape was made. The third research question therefore reads:

SRQ3: How can the socio-cultural landscape of Dutch farmers be categorized on the basis of collective attitudes towards the sustainability transition?

Young farmers have an important role in the transition, for they are the future generation of farmers that will manage the land. This means that their choices and their viewpoints will largely influence the future of our agricultural system. Research has shown that younger farmers are more innovative, entrepreneurial and amenable to change, making them important policy targets for adopting environmentally friendly practices (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019b; Hamilton, Bosworth, & Ruto, 2015). However, it has also been observed that young farmers have become notably more radical since the protests started, denying nitrogen problems, discrediting the government, and approving of civil disobedience to secure their futures (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019b; Bouma et al., 2020). Because of the importance of this group in the transition, this group received special attention during this research.

This research on Dutch farmers' identities stands upon a couple of sensitizing concepts that form the analytical framework. Strategic decision making (SDM) (Methorst, 2016), Stryker's identity theory (Stryker in Burton and Wilson, 2006), and definitions of personal, social and collective identity (Owens, 2006) are relevant concepts that were used in this thesis and described in the analytical framework. Constructivist grounded theory described by Charmaz (2006), has informed and inspired the research methodology. The self-concepts and identities of Dutch farmers were investigated through content and narrative analysis, especially on social media and other online media sources in the timeframe between November 2019 and November 2021, and through interviews with key informants.

2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This research on farmers' identities stands upon a couple of sensitizing concepts which inspired the research objective and the research questions and provided the logic for analysis of the results before synthesizing them into a coherent story. In section 2.1 SDM theory will be explained including the concept 'perceived room for manoeuvre' (pRfM) as introduced by Methorst (2016). This theory was used as a starting point in this research to conceptualize the range of drivers affecting decision making for farm development and helped identifying the research gap which is addressed in this thesis. Methorst's SDM builds further upon the broader research tradition of *farming styles* (Van der Ploeg, 2003) which also will be touched upon in section 2.1. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the process of embedding (as described by Methorst, 2016) and the process of identification relate to one another, which is further explained in section 2.2. The concepts of identity (personal, social and collective), identification, and the self-concept are explained in section 2.3 on the basis of Owens (2006) and other sources. Hereby, Stryker's *Identity theory* as explained by Burton and Wilson (2006) and Owens (2006) provides a conceptual backbone to understand the processes around the self-concept and identities, how they related to each other, and to social networks. These theoretical notions of identity have informed the operationalization of the research questions and the interpretation and analysis of the results. In section 2.4 definitions are provided of the concepts group, social network, and community as they are understood in this thesis.

2.1 SDM, OPPORTUNITY IDENTIFICATION AND FARMING STYLES

The research goal and approach are constructed upon the theoretical context of *strategic decision making* (SDM) research and opportunity identification research. These theories are interpreted and used as described by Methorst (2016) and originate from a body of literature in the field of entrepreneurship research. Methorst (2016) envisions farm development as an iterative process whereby opportunity identification is followed by SDM which stirs farmer's practices, and is in constant interaction with its multidimensional context through different types and levels of embedding. The outcomes of SDM, or in other words: the practices, affect the opportunity identification process, as it changes the reality of the farmer and thereby his or her perceived available opportunities. Methorst (2016) stresses that opportunity identification is subjective and strongly linked to the individual farmer's perception of opportunities rather than the actual, or objective, availability of opportunities. For this reason, Methorst (2016) introduces *perceived room for manoeuvre* (pRfM) to describe the opportunities that are regarded as viable by the farmer. The iterative process of SDM is envisioned as a cycle in which the outcome of decision-making affects future decisions, and therefore farms usually develop within a certain *development pathway* where the past influences the future (see Fig. 2.1). This interrelated nature of perceptions (of opportunities) and practices leading to certain development pathways are what forms certain *styles of farming* as described by Van der Ploeg (2003) and comrades. These farming styles are strongly influenced by the wider socio-economic context wherein the farmer operates, as the pRfM is affected by the multidimensional context around the farm (Van der Ploeg, 2003, Methorst, 2016). The extent to which a farmer is influenced by a certain socio-material context depends on the level of embedding within that context (Methorst, 2016). Methorst (2016) points to relevance of further research on influences of the level of farm embedding in different socio-material contexts on farmer's pRfM. In this thesis, embedding within different social contexts was investigated in the first research question (SRQ 1).

Methorst (2016) describes drivers that affect farmers' choices and actions along two main lines; some drivers are the farmer's direct interpretation of economic or physical factors that are influencing the

pRfM of the farmer, while others are more personal factors of the farmer him- or herself. In this thesis we will refer to these two categories of drivers as *exogenous* and *endogenous* respectively. Similar divides can be seen in other farm development research. For instance, Farmar-Bowers and Lane (2009) identified personal and external components influencing farmer opportunity creation. Personal components of opportunities unique to the farmer include the farmer's current knowledge, skills, energy, enthusiasm, the land he/she owns, the capital he/she have and the contacts with other people organizations that they can use. External components of opportunities include the existence of markets, finance, transport, insurance, information, expertise, training courses, land for sale or lease, water to purchase, infrastructure, research, government programs and so on. Although these external components are not unique to an individual farmer, sometimes they may be restricted to particular areas or groups of farmers. Droughts, floods, fires, diseases, interest rate and market fluctuations are called random components which are not unique to individual farmers and often have an impact on whole regions (Farmar Bowers and Lane, 2009). Burton and Wilson (2006) identify a similar divide in their analysis of factors that affect agricultural change in the light of a transition from productivist to post-productivist paradigms in the EU. They mention exogenous factors or 'indicators' of agricultural change (in particular policy changes; the political economy framework; farmers' economic adjustment strategies to external forces, etc.), and endogenous characteristics of agricultural change (e.g. attitudes, perceptions, behaviour and identities of specific agricultural and rural actors). Burton and Wilson (2006) relate the exogenous factors to structure and the endogenous factors to agency. They attempt to test Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1991) by verifying the coherence of agricultural change on macro-level (structure) and micro-level (agency). They conclude that there is dissonance between what happens on structural level (in policy, science, economy, etc.) and what happens on agency/micro level (attitudes, perceptions, identities, etc.) and call this "the fallacy of structural causality" in their productivist/post-productivist agricultural change model. What this means in practice, is that 'endogenous drivers' of agricultural development seem to be lagging behind 'exogenous drivers' of agricultural development when it comes to a productivist/post-productivist transition according to Burton and Wilson (2006). Although one may critique this conclusion by wondering if structural drivers are actually 'ahead' in this transition (considering the capitalist paradigm of the world's macro-economic system), Burton and Wilson's (2006) results do shed light on the importance of endogenous drivers when it comes to agricultural development in the face of global challenges in the 2020's.

The predominant forcing factor of the pRfM of Dutch dairy farmers, identified by Methorst (2016) through multiple regression analysis, are the "personal views and preferences" of owner managers. The importance of further qualitative research is stressed in order to arrive at a further understanding of the rationale of farmers behind these perceptions. An extensive quantitative research by Bouma et al., (2019) established that the most important factors relating to the adoption of nature-inclusive practices by Dutch farmers (dairy, arable and mixed) are not only to be part of a nature farming collective and have a Skal certification (for organic production), but also have motivations and openness to experimentation and have beliefs that the agricultural system needs to change. Although the earning capability of the farmers is viewed as an important factor influencing their practices, it is stressed that the more personal factors, as described above, are found to be highly influential and explanatory for the adoption of nature inclusive practices. Trust or distrust in consumer awareness, in the government, and in banks is also mentioned as important factor influencing farmers practices by Bouma, et al. (2019).

The above sources share the premise that the drivers influencing farmers' decision making can be divided into endogenous and exogenous. They all stress that the endogenous drivers are extremely relevant, and that there is need for more in-depth understanding of endogenous drivers. For this reason,

this research aims at gaining a better understanding of these endogenous drivers, and does this through a symbolic interactionist lens, focusing on the aspect of identity.

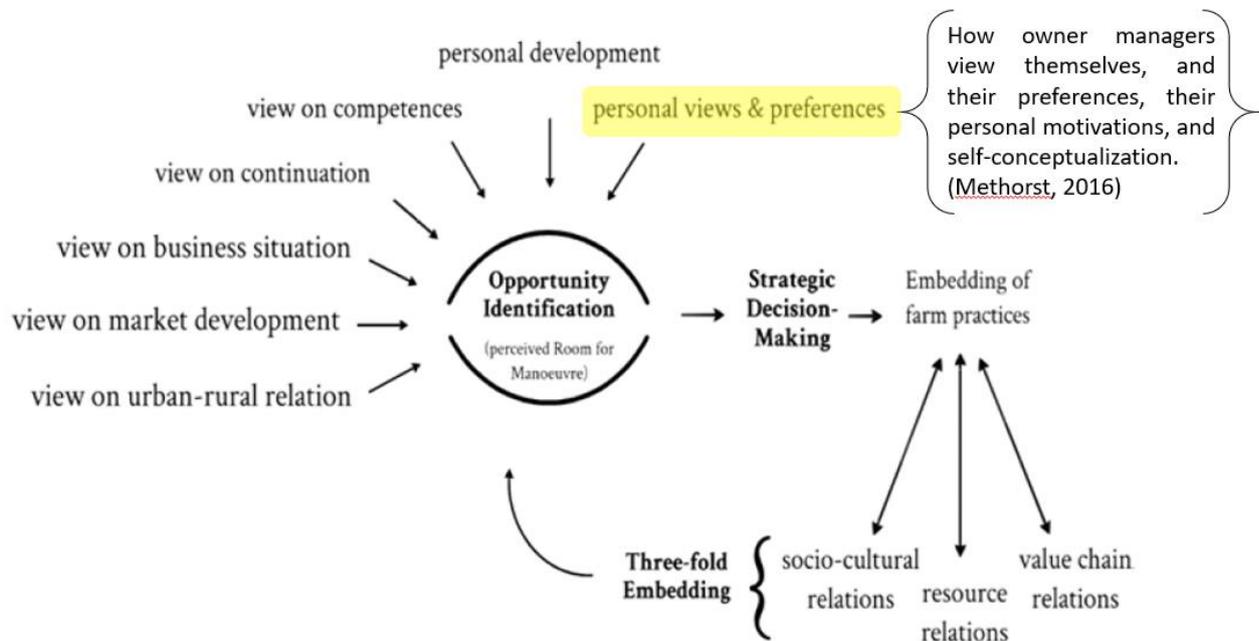


Figure 2.1 Schematic overview of SDM theory adapted from Methorst (2016).

2.2 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

A symbolic interactionist lens was employed to further understand and explain the endogenous drivers of farm development and farmer actions. Methorst (2016) stresses the importance of socio-material embedding that affects a farmers’ strategic decision-making process. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, one could say that social embedding is the main, or even the only thing that shapes endogenous drivers. The symbolic interactionist viewpoint has its roots in social constructivism and is based upon the idea that the self is essentially a ‘social structure’ that is created through social experiences (Burton and Wilson, 2006). A central notion in this school of thought is that the self and society are *twinborn*; “one has no identity apart from society; one has no individuality apart from identity” (Owens 2006, p. 216 cited Cooley 1902, p.21). From this point of view, the self-concept is: “a social creation moulded by a person’s interactions with others, his or her past and ongoing affiliations and experiences within and across social contexts and institutional affiliations, and his or her location within culture and social structure” (Owens, 2006). Not only is the self and the self-concept a social product, but also a social force: “it influences the individual’s cognitions, emotions and behaviours and it influences the group that the individual belongs to, as well as the society as a whole through the manifestation of social problems linked to the self-concept” (Owens, 2006).

Moreover, from a symbolic interactionist viewpoint: “human action and interactions are shaped substantially by the definitions the actors derive from the situation and these definitions are based on shared meanings that arise as people interact with one another” (Owens, 2006). From a symbolic interactionist lens society is comprised of a set of social networks with their own way of experiencing the world. These social networks share views on the symbolic values of objects, attitudes, and behaviours. Individuals can feel they belong to this network, and thereby start viewing the world, and valuing things in a similar manner, or in other words “identifying” oneself with this group (Burton and Wilson,

2006). In this research the social networks that farmers identify with were the research object in SRQ1, and the shared meanings, symbolic values, attitudes, cognitions and behaviours were the research object in SRQ2.

2.3 IDENTITIES AND THE SELF-CONCEPT

Learning about the self-concept and identities enable us to deepen our understanding about endogenous drivers, for these concepts have a rich theoretical underpinning that explain and processes associated with them. Within some definitions (especially from a symbolic interactionist perspective) one could argue that identity and self-concept encompass all endogenous drivers that lead to actions and decisions of farmers. In this section identity and self-concept will be defined as they are understood in this thesis, and the relations between them are described.

Bluntly put, *self-concept* and *identity* provide basic answers to the questions "Who am I" and "Where do I belong" (Oyserman, 2012). In the field of social psychology, identities are described on various levels; personal, social and collective identities (Owens, 2006). Despite differences, these three levels of identity all encompass ideas about demarcation of the world in social categories, and the relation between the individual and the social category (Owens, 2006). In other words: "*categories people use to specify who they are and to locate themselves relative to other people*" (Owens, 2006, p.207 cited Michener & Delamater). In this thesis the three levels of identity are used to: 1. get insight into motivations and decision-making of individual farmers (personal identity); 2. understand how farmers categorize the world and how they position themselves within the social categories (social identity), and 3. learn if and/or how collectivity amongst farmer communities results in collective (political) action (collective identity).

2.3.1 Personal identities and the self-concept

Personal identities are attached to individuals and internalized by them (Owens, 2006). In this section personal identities are defined and it is explained how they relate to social identities, to provide the reader with an understanding of how social contexts (which is the main study object) influence the individual farmers. The following description by (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012) denotes what is understood by these attached and internalized personal identities of individuals, what these personal identities result in, and how they are integrated within the *self-concept*:

"Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past -- what used to be true of me, the present -- what is true of me now, or the future -- the person I expect or wish to become, the person I feel obligated to try to become, or the person I fear I may become. Identities orient us; they provide a meaning-making lens and focus our attention on some but not other features of the immediate context. Together, identities make up one's self-concept -- variously described as what comes to mind when one thinks of, one's theory of one's personality, and what one believes is true of oneself." (Oyserman et al., 2012)

In this definition it becomes clear that the self-concept is composed of several identities, which are presented as *multiple*, and *relational*. Consequently, one may induce that the concept of embedding, as used by Methorst (2016), may affect the pRfM of farmers by shaping their personal identities, which compose the self-concept. This process can also be named *identification*. *Identification* can be defined as "appropriation of and commitment to a particular identity or series of identities" (Owens, 2006, p.216 cited MacKinnon 1994, p.17) and is used to describe the process people use to link themselves and others to groups or social networks (Owens, 2006). Together, this implies that people (who identify with multiple social contexts) have multiple identities, which each give their behaviour meaning and purpose (Owens, 2006).

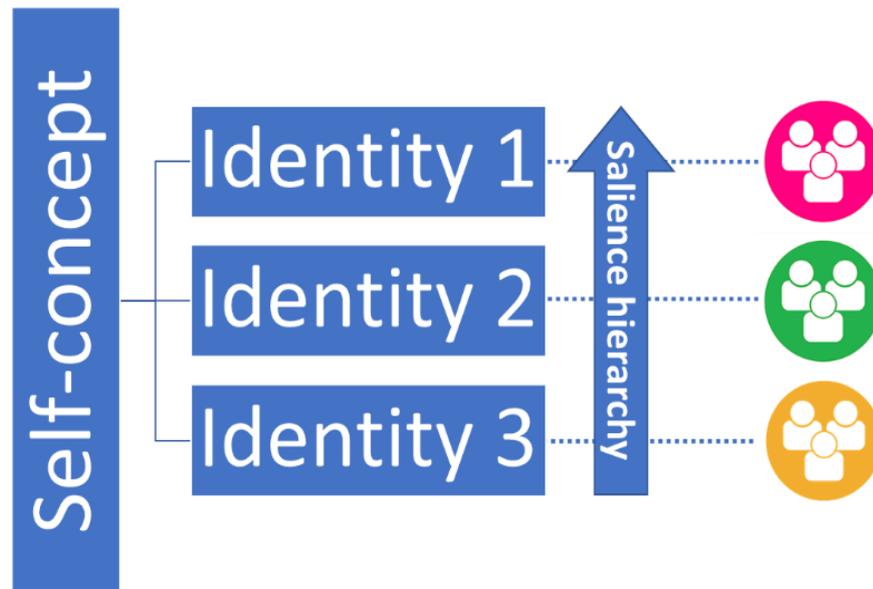


Figure 2.2 Schematic visualization of identity theory by Stryker in Burton and Wilson (2016).

The idea that identities are multiple and relational is further explained in Stryker's identity theory (Stryker in Burton and Wilson, 2006; Owens, 2006). This theory is based on the premise that society comprises a set of social networks, each with a unique way of experiencing the world (Burton and Wilson, 2006), with *shared cognitions* and *intersubjectivity*. Individuals can feel they belong to this social network, and thereby start viewing the world, and valuing things in a similar manner, or in other words "identifying" oneself with this social network. According to Stryker's identity theory, as visualized in Figure 2.2, an individual can feel that he or she belongs to several social networks simultaneously, and therefore the self-concept is constituted of multiple identities. This theory explains that different identities have *hierarchical salience*, meaning that at a certain point in time there is a particular ranking with which the identities are *invoked*. Invocation of a certain identity is the adoption of role-behaviours that align with the social network from which that identity is derived. Stryker hypothesizes that the salience of a specific identity within one's self-concept, i.e. the probability of that identity being invoked, is affected by the position of an individual in the social network from which the identity is derived. The salience of an identity is therefore dependent on the relational commitment (amount of interactions and the time and effort of interactions) of the individual to that social network, plus the emotional significance of people in the network for the individual in question (Owens, 2006).

In this research, Stryker's identity theory (Stryker in Burton and Wilson, 2016) was used to understand the relations between different concepts in the research questions and to analyse the results. This theory opened up the researcher's mind to the idea that even though, at a certain point in time one identity may be invoked in a certain individual, other identities may be simultaneously present.

Stryker's theory of multiple identities (Stryker in Owens, 2006) makes it possible to move away from traditional categorizations of individuals in boxes, but rather recognizes the complexity and depth of the self-concept, thereby potentially revealing nuances present within individuals, agricultural communities, social networks, or subcultures. Therefore, the research objects are not the self-concepts of specific individuals, but rather the social networks and intersubjectivities that characterize specific identities present within the self-concepts of today's Dutch farmers. This exposes where different social networks may or may not overlap in their stance towards global challenges to move away from a "yes" and "no" discussion, but rather look for anchoring points for common ground.

2.3.2 Social- and collective identities

In this thesis the interpretation of social identity that comes from the field of psychology was adopted. Psychologists who use social identity theory see social identity as a "*cognitive tool individuals use to partition, categorize, and order their social environment and their own place in it*" (Owens, 2006). This leads social identity theorists to a particular interest in examining the effect of specific group memberships on how people define themselves (Owens, 2006). Social identity theory was originally developed to explain prejudice and largescale conflict among religious, ethnic, and political/national groupings. As such, social identity theory revolves around a keen interest in social problems stemming from *in-group/out-group* categorizations (Owens, 2006). *Counter-roles/identities* are a product of these *in-group/out-group* categorizations. They are roles and identities that belong to the 'other', meaning roles and identities that do not belong to the social network from which an individual's identity is derived and results in disapproval of behaviour which constitutes that *counter-role/identity* (Burton and Wilson, 2006). Within this research these *in-group/out-group* categorizations and *counter-identities* are used as a tool to understand where certain groups of farmers position themselves in societal discussions about the sustainability transition, thereby unveiling their own social identities.

According to Tajfel as mentioned in Owens (2006), the most positive reaction to finding oneself a member of an undervalued social group is to take social action that expresses the needs of one's in-group to some out-group(s), entering collective identity (Owens, 2006). Collective identity can be defined as: "*an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups at a more complex level) concerning the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action is to take place*" (Owens, 2006, p.226 cited Melucci, 1996, p.70). So it is a process by which a set of individuals interact to create a shared identity and action system that is cognitively and emotionally framed through active relationships with others (Owens, 2006). In contrast with social identity which is about social categorization, collective identity is a process whereby a social identity results in collective action. Often a collective identity comes into being when collectivities oppose other collectivities. In practice it is often the opposition of a dominant order (Owens, 2006). Social identity can transition into a collective identity by the process of group members *sharing with each other cognitive and emotional aspects of a social identity*, which in turn may get mobilized into action through the rise of a particular collective identity (Owens, 2006). The emergence of collective identities within farming communities in reaction to societal developments and the sustainability transition is a topic of interest in this thesis through which the political influence of farmers on the agricultural system can be better understood. The third research question (SRQ 3) was aimed at finding coherence between narratives that constitute the intersubjectivity within social- and collective farmer identities. The elements constituting personal identities inherently constitute social- and collective identities, when viewed from a social constructivist perspective. In order to answer SRQ 3, the elements constituting identity were used to bring narratives together in a coherent story that typifies a social category of farmers. Cognitions, feelings, attitudes, sentiments, norms, values, meanings, in- and out-group categorizations, and

relations are all aspects of identity that were used to describe social categories of farmers in the third part of this research.

2.4 DEFINING GROUPS, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES

In scientific literature, and in common language, the terms groups, social networks and communities have similar meanings, and are often used interchangeably. Because the meanings of these words vary from user to user it will be made explicit what is meant by these words within this thesis. Groups are typically created by a person or organization who either decide on which individuals form a group, or create the a structure or format that enables group formation. For a group it is defined who is in it and who is not. An association between people wherein it is less clear who is in it and who is not, but people interact with one another on a regular basis, is a social network. Communities are broader than that. In communities usually cultural aspects such as common understandings, manners, and traditions are what bind people together. Membership is typically something that happens in groups, whereas a sense of belonging is typically what forms communities. Groups may bring about community formation, but communities are not necessarily related to a specific group. In this thesis we are interested in identity, which is invoked through a sense of belonging and therefore the concept of community is more relevant. However, groups are more easily identifiable, and therefore function better as easier research objects. Social networks lay somewhere in between, and they are linked to identities as described with Stryker's identity theory (Owens, 2006). Studying communities, and related identities is not straightforward for usually things are not black and white nor static. In practice many communities tend to overlap. It is not the aim of this research to put people in boxes, to avoid that, this thesis focusses on factors (or variables) that differentiate communities from one another rather than aiming to identify actual real life communities that exist here and now. Examples of specific groups are used to illustrate these factors.

3 METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) that was used in this research, is in line with the previously described theoretical approach (symbolic interactionism). Constructivist grounded theory methodology leaves freedom for the researcher's own intuitive research approaches, also leaving space for more open-ended methodological pathways. This allows the researcher to continuously re-evaluate what the best next steps are to reach the research objectives in an iterative manner.

3.1 GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory is a slightly controversial though increasingly popular research approach- and methodology for qualitative research in the social sciences (Farmar-Bowers & Lane, 2009; J. Morse, 2009) that serves as a way to learn about the worlds we study and as a method for developing theories to understand them (Charmaz, 2006). It *“enables not only the documentation of change within social groups, but understanding of the core processes central to that change. Grounded theory enables the identification and description of phenomena, their main attributes, and the core, social or social psychological process, as well as their interactions in the trajectory of change”* (Morse, 2009). Its popularization began in 1967 with the publication of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by Glazer and Strauss, whereafter it developed along several different pathways and within a wide range of disciplines, resulting in a variety of approaches to the method (Charmaz, 2006; Farmar-Bowers & Lane, 2009; J. M. Morse et al., 2016). In this thesis Constructivist Grounded Theory, as described by Kathy Charmaz in 2006, will be used as a guide to structure the research methodology and to inspire the research approach. This variation of grounded theory was chosen for its appropriate balance between methodological guidance while at the same time inviting the researcher to find his or her own approach according to one's own viewpoint and personality. Charmaz (2006) describes constructivist grounded theory as a set of principles and practices, not prescriptions. Additionally, constructivist grounded theory is rooted in the social constructivist school of thought, more precisely, in symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2006). This coheres with the earlier described lens that is used throughout the theoretical underpinning of this research on the concept of identity.

Constructivist grounded theory is an interpretative method that uses an inductive approach to generate a new theory from the data, all kinds of data (Charmaz, 2006). It is a process of data collection, data analysis, theoretical abstraction, and constant comparison wherein analysis proceeds alongside – and informs – future data collection in an iterative process (Charmaz, 2006). Choosing a sampling method on the basis previous data analysis is called theoretical sampling. This is an important element of grounded theory. Revisiting memos throughout the data collection and analysis iteratively, facilitates interpretation of the data, moving from the categories and themes to the concepts that ultimately shape a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006).

It is important to note that being an interpretative approach, constructivist grounded theory is based on the core conception that the view of the researcher is inseparable from the results (Charmaz, 2006; J. M. Morse et al., 2016). This inclusion of the researcher's view is not only seen as an inevitable fact (as opposed to positivist approaches), it is seen as a valuable addition to the research that may add depth to the results; *“I see doing grounded theory as a creative process—if you really want to know what's going on, you have to feel it; you have to be affected by it; you have to let it move you”* (J. M. Morse et al., 2016). Opening up to inclusion of the researcher's view in the results requires transparency of the researcher in order to ensure scientific integrity and to produce useful results. Due to this

personal element in the research, it is not replicable, nor will the results be generalizable and therefore it serves as an exploratory research and to inform hypothesis formation.

3.1.1 Three research iterations

In this thesis three phases of data collection, data analysis and interpretation were performed (see Figure 3.1). In phase 1 the intention was to dive into the data as unbiased and open minded as possible, and to identify the topics that live among farming communities by absorbing large quantities of diverse data, to get a feeling for the themes that are important to farmers, and for the social realities of farmers without coloring this through an a priori definition of precise research themes and topics. Although this research was aimed at understanding farmers' identities in the light of the sustainability transition, phase 1 was intended to get closer to the perspectives and feelings of farmers and therefore the environmentally oriented lens of the researcher was put aside as much as possible to draw a picture that is as objective as possible. Phase 1 also served as an orientation on farming communities and networks that was necessary to find the informants for the consecutive phases.

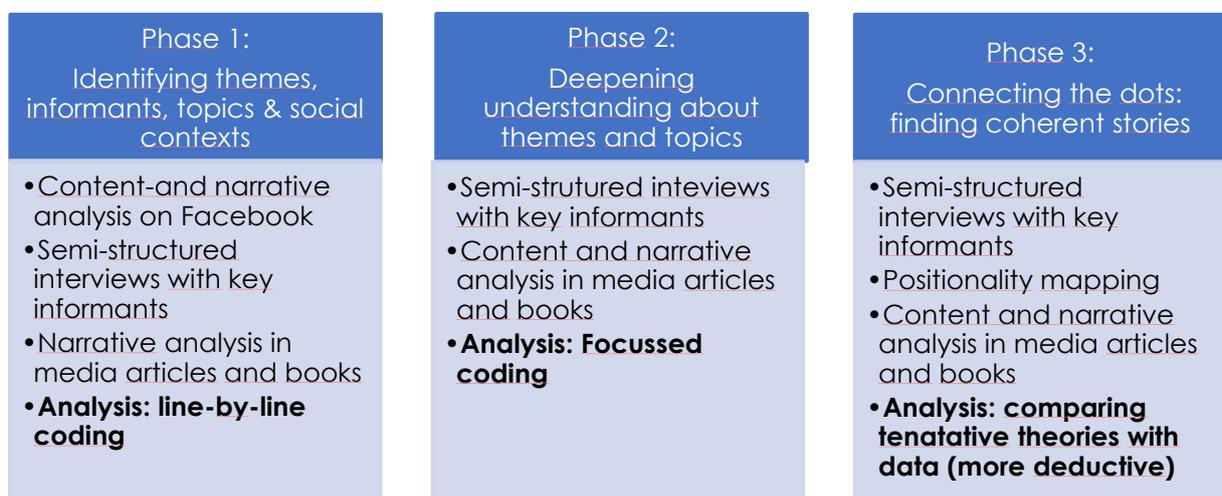


Figure 3.1 Schematic visualization the three iterations of this research wherein the data collection methods were decided on the basis tentative categories that emerged from the previous data analysis.

Phase 2 was aimed at deepening the researcher's understanding about the themes that were identified during phase 1, to verify the researcher's initial understandings of the social contexts of farmers, and to discover diversity and nuances within certain themes that live amongst farming communities. Phase 2 yielded descriptive results that illustrate the social realities of farmers (SRQ1), and elaborate on the themes that bring about collectivity among farming communities (SRQ2). The different aspects of identity (as described in the theoretical framework) were used as sensitizing concepts to select the data that is relevant to deepen our understanding of farming identities. Eventually phase 3 of the research was aimed at connecting the dots, and identifying coherence among the diverse narratives and associated social networks, yielding four social categories of farmers (SRQ3).

3.2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

3.2.1 Narrative- and content analysis

Narrative analysis is a widely used technique in the social sciences that enables the researcher to understand its research objects through the stories that are told. Here, ontological interpretation of

narrative analysis is used, which is in line with social constructivist perspective that stands central in this research. According to her *“it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities”* (Somers, 1994, p. 606). This interpretation of narrative analysis as a method suits the approach to identity that we take in in this research because it *“ avoids categorical rigidities by emphasizing the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations that shift over time and space”* (Somers, 1994, p.607). Besides text also other material was used as data; like images and video’s. The primary sources that were used as data for the narrative and content analysis are Facebook groups and pages, online footage of speeches, debates and discussions, websites of organizations, letters, and publicly published interviews. Secondary sources that were used were books and news articles.

The content of the Facebook groups and pages was one of the main sources of data because social media is playing an important role in present-day social networks and identity formation. Additionally Facebook provides the option of creating public, or publicly visible groups that have been easy to access during the research. The study of private WhatsApp groups has not been part of this research for privacy and accessibility reasons, and Twitter did not provide the option of studying groups themselves, studying the whole range of individual tweets went beyond the scope of this research.

To find important internet platforms for Dutch farmers a global exploration on the internet was done. Using Google search the terms *boer+platform* (farmer+platform), and *boer+forum* (farmer+forum) were used, on the Facebook search function the terms *boer** (farmer*), *agri** (prefix agri as in English), *agro** (prefix agro as in English), *landbouw* (agriculture), and *farm* were used. For this research the relevance of an internet page was decided upon by using a couple of criteria: they had to provide a space for farmers to interact with one another, providing a “community building” function, and additionally the groups had to either reach farmers across the whole country, or be very large (<1000 members). The search in Google did not result in many relevant or accessible platforms that fell under the selection criteria. On Facebook a large variety of relevant groups were found. It wasn’t possible to verify if the participants on the platforms were actually farmers, however the content indicated that at a large part of the interactions in the groups could be attributed to farmers. The 39 relevant platforms that were explored were first listed in a Microsoft Excel sheet with a brief description of the content and the number of members. In some cases, group administrators had to admit the researcher to the group in order to see the content. Admission was always requested, and in most cases granted. This was not necessary in order to see group names and follower numbers. On Facebook many pages and groups complied with the selection criteria mentioned above. As the online social networks were explored, six categories emerged grasping the diversity group functions. The list of all groups was ordered from largest to smallest in Microsoft Excel to decide on the largest groups. From the top groups a small sample was taken for deeper content analysis. Size was taken into account, but also diversity on the basis of the different categories that were identified. Data was collected by making screenshots and copying text, creating a database of representative content that was relevant to this research (not attached to this thesis for privacy reasons).

3.2.2 Interviewing key informants

Semi-structured interviews with key informants were performed to complement, verify, and further understand the narratives that were found, to ask for relevant sources of information, to understand the relevance of the information that was already found. In the final part of the research the interviewees’ perspectives helped the researcher to draw a picture of the socio-cultural landscape of different farming identities. The interviewees shared ideas about the most important differences between farming communities and about what characterizes certain categories of farmers and certain farmer networks. In total, five online interviews were held via video-calls, recorded, and transcribed

word by word. All key informants were chosen because of their overview and knowledge of the agricultural sector, their knowledge about what lives among a broad range of farmers and their understanding about the sustainability transition in agriculture.

The first three interviewees (phase 1) were young farmer representatives from the Dutch young farmers' union (NAJK); Leendert Jan Onnes (representative of arable farming), Tim van der Mark (representative of pig and poultry farming), and Willem Voncken (international representative of young Dutch farmers). The young farmers' representatives from different sectors were seen as an important source of knowledge of the diversity of attitudes and topics that live among farmers in the different sectors, and the positioning of young farmers within those topics. The fourth interviewee (phase 2 and 3) was a marketing expert within the agricultural journalism sector who came from a farmer family and still has farmers in his family (pseudonym: Interviewee M). This interviewee was chosen because his work field demands great knowledge of the diversity of farmers in the Netherlands and the topics, themes and attitudes that are alive in present-day Dutch agriculture. The fifth interviewee (phase 2 and 3) was chosen because of his knowledge about the transition in agriculture, working for *Boeren-Natuur* (Farmer and Nature or Agricultural Nature): an organization that connects all nature inclusive farming collectives in the Netherlands and being politically active as a promotor of sustainable agriculture. This interviewee started as a conventional dairy farmer but has transitioned his own farm towards nature inclusive practices. The interview script was adapted after every interview as the themes, storylines and categorizations became clearer throughout the research process, with every consecutive interview being used to verify tentative results and to help make sense of the previously analyzed data.

3.2.3 Positionality mapping

To create the social categories of farmers on the basis of attitudes towards the sustainability transition (phase 3) it was necessary to get an understanding of the positionality of the different organizations by which farmers feel represented and that are actively spreading narratives in public realms. After the identification of important organizations that are involved in political representation of farmers, some agricultural experts were asked to help position these organizations in a two dimensional field that helped the researcher to understand their positionality vis-a-vis change and government interventions in agriculture. This was done in Google Drawings, where respondents could edit the positions of the different organizations that were placed in the two-dimensional field by the researcher. Four respondents helped position the organizations on the field, one of which was a new informant, namely a representative of the arable farming labor union. Alongside with the positionality maps, emails were exchanged with the respondents to discuss their reasoning.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

In grounded theory approaches, data analysis/coding usually consists of two phases; the initial phase, where data is coded in detail, and a focused phase where data is coded according to the most salient codes that have been found in the initial phase (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding is the first step in interpreting the data and includes sentence by sentence or incident by incident coding, whereas in focused coding big amounts of text and other information will be scanned to identify certain topics of interest (Charmaz, 2006). These two phases of coding are important in order to make sure that the categories emerge from the data itself and are not based on presumptions (Charmaz, 2006). In phase 1 of this research the dataset of gathered content from social media and other sources, and the first interviews with key informants were all analyzed using line-by-line coding. This is done by creating tags for all themes that were present in the data in the coding software program Atlas.ti. This yielded a wide range of codes and code categories from which the relevant themes were extracted that needed to be discussed in this thesis. The aspects that constitute the concept of identity were also used to decide which

codes were useful connect the data to the research questions. In phase two, additional sources were analyzed using focused coding to deepen the understanding of the previously established themes. In phase 3 of this research, data was mostly used to verify tentative theoretical categories that were established by the researcher, and to find specific information that was necessary to connect or clarify certain topics. The quotes that are presented in the result section of this thesis were all translated by the researcher from Dutch to English. It was chosen to present quotes as original quotes (with quotation marks) to enable the reader to differentiate between directly translated quotes and paraphrased bits of data.

3.4 THEORY FORMATION

The method that was used for the categorization of ideal type farmers was a product of the operationalization of identity (into different aspects: cognitions, feelings, attitudes, sentiments, norms, values, meanings, in- and out-group categorizations and relations), and the aspect that was most relevant to reach the research objective was used to form the basis of the categories: attitudes towards the sustainability transition. The other aspects that constitute identity were used as a framework to order the cohering narratives that were found within the data. This is based upon the notion that different aspects that constitute a social identity must cohere, as theoretically they are what binds a specific social network or community together via shared narratives and intersubjectivity. The cohering narratives were fitted within one category creating shared discourse and shared identity, by connecting the pieces of narrative into a larger story. Additional data was gathered where the categorization of certain aspects was unclear.

4 RESULTS

To increase understanding about how the process of identification influences Dutch farmers' attitudes towards the sustainability transition today, data was gathered and interpreted that enhances one's insight into the following questions: 1. Which social networks affect the identities of Dutch farmers and how can their influence be characterized? (SRQ1), 2. Which shared values, meanings, attitudes, sentiments and cognitions about farming and being a farmer drive collectivity within farming communities (SRQ2), and 3. How the socio-cultural landscape of Dutch farmers can be categorized on the basis of collective attitudes towards the sustainability transition. The results that were obtained for the three specific research questions (SRQ1, SRQ2 and SRQ3) are described in the three subchapters of this result section (4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 respectively). All content that is presented here was translated from Dutch to English by the researcher.

4.1 DESCRIBING FARMERS' CONTEXTUALITY AND THE PROCESS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL EMBEDDING

Following from the social constructivist idea that identity formation is inseparable from social context (as explained in the analytical framework), understanding social contexts wherein farmers operate and the processes through which these social contexts shape them, becomes rather relevant to understand farmer's identities. In this subsection it is explored which social networks affect the identities of Dutch farmers and how that happens (SRQ1). To answer this research question, an investigation was done in phase 1 of this research to get oriented on the different social contexts wherein farmers are embedded. Farmers in the Netherlands are connected to one another through various groups and social networks, ranging from formal to informal, and from local to national. There are many forms of interaction, and facilitating structures that shape the social contexts of farmers in the Netherlands. Most farmers in the Netherlands are members with some kind of group, be it an association, cooperative, or interest organization (Voncken, 2020). At the same time, in daily life farmers are part of their local networks and families, both connecting with farmers and non-farmers. Communication platforms, agricultural professional media and social media also have a networking function in community formation within the agricultural sector as they spread and connect farmer's ideas and narratives. These different social contexts are presented and described in this chapter. Social media, and especially Facebook has had extra attention in this research because it is one of the most famous online social platforms today, and especially popular among young people, giving a peek view into the young farmer's networks. The ways in which- and the extent to which these different social contexts affect the identities of Dutch farmers follows from the positions and levels of embedding that farmers have within the different social contexts. This subsection attends to these topics by presenting visions of agricultural experts on the matter, and the through further analysis on the basis of theoretical lenses through which identity can be understood (as presented in the analytical framework).

4.1.1 Local networks and families

It is often mentioned that families are a very important element of farmer's lives (Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020). Traditionally large families are the units that own, run, shape and follow-up farming business which often live in remote areas. This means that the family unit was and often still is the most important social context wherein farmers operate. This largely influences the values and viewpoints of individuals, shaping who one is and who one must be. Family traditions largely influence farmer's choices, for family commitment is one of the most important values in farming communities (Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020). These deeply engrained family traditions are sometimes

hampering individual decision making or an individual's pursuit to change, for traditional farming practices are an important element in family norms and values (Interviewee M, 2021). According to Interviewee M (2021), holding on to certain types of status and standing are important values that traditional farming families want to uphold. He thinks that this societal status is inevitably declining as farming families are shrinking, for the family networks are becoming less extended.

On a local level farmers are often part of a village or town with which they interact to a smaller or larger extent depending on the farmer and the circumstances. They can be part of the local football club or similar groups (Onnes, 2020). Often though, farmers in a certain area tend to stick together, connecting with other farmers more than they would with all other neighbors (Onnes, 2020). Farmers are often interested in how it is going on neighboring farms and like to spend their time talking about farming-related topics with other farmers. According to Onnes (2020) this happens more among farmers than among other professions, because farming is really a way of life rather than just a profession; *"When two farmers meet, they immediately talk about, well, what variety have you sown, how are things going? It just goes, well... as a farmer you work 24 hours a day, it's what you put your heart and soul in. And then farmers just like to talk to other farmers about what and how"* (Onnes, 2020).

On top of that, farmers often perceive their neighboring farmers as colleagues rather than competitors due to the fact that prices are fixed by cooperatives and the successes of your neighbor will have no influence on your income (Onnes, 2020). During several interviews in this study it was mentioned that farmers have regular social contact with other farmers in the neighborhood (Datema, 2021; Onnes, 2020; Van der Mark, 2020). Interviewee M (2021) sees that judgements of neighboring farmers influence farmer's management choices, although to a lesser extent now than a decade ago. Additionally, he observed that like-minded farmers tend to group together (Interviewee M, 2021). Sometimes contact among farmers on a local level is facilitated by local departments of unions, local study groups or collectives.

4.1.2 Study groups

Study groups are an important phenomenon along the whole spectrum of farmers (Interviewee M, 2021). Study groups are small groups of farmers that come together around a certain topic in order to learn together and improve their farms (Voncken, 2020). Topics vary from increasing milk production per cow to decreasing nitrogen emissions, increasing biodiversity on farms, innovation or sales (Interviewee M, 2021). Sometimes they are organized by the farmers themselves, within their local networks or farmer collectives. In farmer collectives information sharing and learning happens within study groups, but additionally collective action takes place: making agreements and achieving overarching goals together (Datema, 2021). Besides farmer collectives many types of organizations invoke study groups for farmers: agricultural banks, cooperatives, interest organizations, unions, small- or big advisory bureaus, agricultural journals, amongst many others (Datema, 2021; Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020). Young farmers usually join a certain type of study group rather soon too (Voncken, 2020). In the past study groups mostly occurred on a local level, but increasingly study groups are also bringing farmers together on regional and even on national levels (Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020). Modern communication like WhatsApp increasingly facilitates learning groups at larger distances (Interviewee M, 2021).

According to Interviewee M (2021) large companies or cooperatives sometimes use study groups to push information that will benefit their own businesses. There are many types of study groups with different objectives, topics, organizers and even cultures. Datema (2021) mentions that farmers often go to various study groups in the area, but he noticed that openness of an individual farmer about

certain topics like nature inclusive farming vary depending on the context. This indicates that different study groups have different cultures and norms, hence they invoke different identities.

4.1.3 Social media groups

Social media increasingly plays a role in connecting farmers, creating and facilitating groups and networks. Social Media platforms have created the opportunity for farmers to extend their networks beyond the local environments (Westerink, 2020), it enables live peer monitoring and group learning (Interviewee M, 2021), mobilization of groups, information sharing and rapid propagation of certain narratives (*Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages, 2020-2021*; Mensink, 2020). Social media provides a platform that can be used by existing groups of all kinds, from large interest organizations to small farmer's collectives. Yet, in many cases it also provides a space and structure to catalyze the formation of newly emerging groups, which may stay solely on social media, or may grow out to become organizations outside of the virtual space, like political parties or protest groups.

Important social media platforms for farmers include Facebook, Twitter (Onnes, 2020), and WhatsApp (Interviewee M, 2021; Mensink, 2020). These three media platforms differ in their function and therefore also bring forward different kinds of community- and identity formation. WhatsApp is private, and therefore has played a major role in the formation and organization of action groups like Farmers Defense Force and *Agractie* (Mensink, 2020). However, this medium is also used for the formation of study groups (Interviewee M, 2021) and many other forms of knowledge and information exchange (*Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages, 2020-2021*; Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020). According to a young farmer representative, Twitter has a different function and also different kinds of users than Facebook. According to him Twitter is used to encounter a wide range of discourses and arguments in society, and is mostly used by those who are interested in the societal dialogue and want to understand different perspectives, whereas Facebook rather facilitates group formation among like-minded users and therefore provides a platform for in-group discussions (Van der Mark, 2020). A topic of discussion, and in some cases even concern, is that social media also facilitates the creation and propagation of alternative (or fake) facts (Voncken, 2020), which in itself leads to community formation and identity formation among those who believe in certain facts or not. Another point of concern is that social media enables certain groups to gain attention that is disproportionate to the amount of members of a certain group. This may lead to overrepresentation in public debates (Onnes, 2020). It is important to point out that the extent to which social media groups influence farmers' identities depends on the extent to which members are active and committed to the groups (their level of embedding), often people follow groups but are not actively engaged (Voncken, 2020). According to Datema (2021) many farmers who have something to complain about are expressing themselves more on social media since the action groups emerged, because they feel supported and strengthened by them. This means that the presence of certain narratives can lower the threshold for people to also publicly engage with those narratives.

Among the different social media platforms, Facebook has been studied in most detail, since it provides the option of creating public, or publicly visible groups that have been easy to access during the research. The study of private WhatsApp groups has not been part of this research for privacy and accessibility reasons, and Twitter did not provide the option of studying groups themselves, studying the whole range of individual tweets went beyond the scope of this research. To what extent Facebook encompasses groups along the whole spectrum of farming communities is unclear. However, different interviewees have stated that Facebook solely provides a limited range of farmer networks in the Netherlands. However, Facebook did provide the possibility for in-depth content analysis which yielded much useful content for section 4.2.

35 Facebook groups were analyzed, out of which six were examined more in detail. Their (relative) popularity was assessed by ranking them from largest to smallest amount of followers. This resulted in the identification of six main categories of farmer Facebook groups. These categories are; **1. fun groups** which are meant to exchange fun pictures and stories about farming life, **2. commercial groups** which are meant as sales platforms for services, real estate, machinery and materials related to agriculture, **3. Matching groups**, aimed to match people to farmers in love relationships, **4. information exchange groups**, where good practices, but also political updates are shared, **5. farmer-citizen connection/farming promotion groups**, aiming at improving and restoring the image (re-framing) of farmers, and engaging in dialogue with society, and **6. Action/critical groups** in which these groups share standpoints, information and emotions around farmers action/protest, review political issues and share footage about actions themselves. These categories describe the diversity of Facebook groups and pages that was based on group descriptions and content evaluation. However, it was also observed that there was some overlap in content between these different types of groups. For instance, farming promotion groups and action groups often shared the same kind of content, but in fun groups also action pictures and political statements were shared, or fun pictures of cows within the action groups. Among the largest Facebook groups the categories 5 (promotion), 6 (action), and 2 (commercial) prevailed. This may give an indication of the topics which are important for those farmers who were active on Facebook in the timeframe of this research. Based on that observation it can be induced that farmer Facebook groups played a role in community formation and idea exchange around farmers' protests and provide a platform for farmer-citizen connection and farming promotion. Some of the larger Facebook groups with these functions are affiliated with organizations outside of the social media platforms. Social media plays a key role in the functioning of these organizations or are even the space where certain organizations have emerged. In the following chapter on interest and lobby organizations these organizations will be described in more detail.

4.1.4 Interest organizations and representation

There are various forms of political representation within the agricultural sector. In practice, these forms are doing more than just political representation. Besides voicing farmers' political interests, they promote farmers' standpoints in public arenas and influence farmer's choices and identities by spreading narratives, around which intersubjectivity emerges and thereby they enhance a sense of collectivity within the agricultural sector. The most long-established and renowned interest organization is the *Land en Tuinbouw Organisatie* (Agriculture and Horticulture Organization) (LTO) which has different fractions in different parts of the country and has a long history as a negotiation partner in political arenas. Besides LTO there are several (traditional) sectoral interest organizations of agricultural producers. Some important ones are POV (pig farming sector), NMV (dairy sector), NVP (poultry sector) and NAV (arable farming sector). An important political difference between these unions is that NAV, and NMV are lobbying for the creation of a level playing field and moving away from world market trade, whereas LTO and POV believe that farmers should be able to compete on the world market by cost-price (Van der Heide, 2021). The young Dutch farmers' association and interest group NAJK has around 8000 members over the whole country and has local, provincial, and national divisions (Onnes, 2020; Voncken, 2020). The function of the different divisions differs between local to national levels, as local divisions are more socially oriented while provincial and national divisions focus mainly on lobby activities (Onnes, 2020; Voncken, 2020). Locally and also somewhat at provincial level social events and knowledge development events are organized which are attended by both young farmers and young people that have affinity with the agricultural sector (Onnes, 2020; Voncken, 2020).

In the past years increasing fragmentation in the agricultural sector has been observed by multiple interviewees, and many farmers are turning their backs on traditional interest organizations (Datema,

2021; Interviewee M, 2021; Van der Mark, 2020). Especially LTO who used to represent about 80% to 90% of the farmers currently only represents 50% of the farmers (Interviewee M, 2021). LTO has historically mainly defended the stakes of productivist world-market oriented agriculture (Interviewee M, 2021), but presently finds itself dangling in the middle of two paradigms as societal demands for a transition in agriculture are growing. As a consequence, two types of farmers are leaving LTO; those who think agriculture is “*fine as it is*” resent LTO for not defending this standpoint enough while those who want to move ahead in the sustainability transition think LTO goes too slowly in that respect (Datema, 2021). According to Datema (2021) LTO is afraid to lose too many members if they publicly engage too much with sustainability and alternative forms of agriculture. According to Interviewee M (2021), traditional interest organizations and agricultural cooperatives have taken over many tasks and roles of farmers in the past decades, strongly stirring the direction of farmer’s decision making, creating amendable farmers. Interviewee M (2021) says that there has always been a group of farmers who were critical towards traditional interest organizations, valued their independence, and wanted to move in their own direction.

The *nitrogen crisis* and the decline of popularity of LTO have resulted in the emergence of new organizations representing farmers, mostly formed around the farmer protests. *Agractie* and *Farmers Defence Force* (FDF) are the two main farmer action groups. The difference between *Agractie* and FDF, according to Bart Kemp (foreman of *Agractie*), is that *Agractie* is more focused on gaining support from the general public and is more focused on dialogue and connection (Mensink, 2020). On their media they spread informative critical updates about nitrogen regulations alongside with strong sentiments around the effects of all the environmental measures (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes*, 2020). Kemp says that most farmers who participated in the protests were dairy farmers. However, also poultry farmers, pig farmers, arable farmers, contract workers and people active in the compound-feed industry participated (Mensink, 2020). According to Interviewee M (2021), FDF is a minority defending the big stakes of world-market oriented agriculture. *Agractie* seems to have a somewhat more protectionist stance, critical about international trade agreements according to Van der Heide (2021). Although typically FDF and *Agractie* came forward as the action-oriented farmer groups, the classical representative organizations also engaged in the protests. LTO for instance, organized some of the protests against the provincial governments (Mensink, 2020), and many NAJK members joined the protests (Onnes, 2020). In negotiations with the government to solve the *nitrogen crisis*, traditional and newly formed interest organizations formed a collective structure called *Het Landbouwcollectief* (the agricultural collective). Hereby, differences between the organizations quickly posed problems in the collaborations (Onnes, 2020; Reijnen Rutten, 2020).

Alongside with the action groups, farmer promotion groups are gaining importance in voicing farmer’s political standpoints. Besides that, these promotion groups show the world what it is like to be a farmer and create support for farmers among the population. Furthermore, they play a role in connecting farmers with one another by sharing stories and feelings that strengthen a sense of unity and hope. Like the action groups, these farmer promotion organizations share strong critical standpoints about “anti-farmer” regulations and standpoints. As mentioned in section 4.1.3, social media has played a major role in the emergence and functioning of these groups. The two largest organizations promoting farmers are *Boer Bewust* (Farm(er) Conscious(ly)) and *BoerBurgerBeweging* (Farmer Citizen Movement). Both of these organizations are sponsored by some agribusiness firms and cooperatives (*Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages*, 2020-2021). *BoerBurgerBeweging* started as a social media campaign, but evolved into a political party which managed to get one seat in the Dutch parliament.

Outside of the “mainstream” farming representative organizations, there are several organizations and networks who are politically active voicing the interests of (the presently still considered niche) sustainable and agro-ecological farmers. Some examples of these groups are *Federatie voor Agro-ecologische Boeren* (Federation for Agro-ecological Farmers), *Toekomstboeren* (Future Farmers), *BoerenRaad* (Farmer’s Council), *BoerenNatuur* (Farmer and Nature of Agricultural Nature), among some others. Together these groups can be seen as a movement jointly engaged in the sustainability transition of Dutch agriculture. *BoerenNatuur* is an overarching organization of farmer collectives who engage in nature-inclusive farming. Interaction between the more “traditional” interest organizations such as LTO, NMV, and the more sustainability-oriented farmer organizations varies. *BoerenNatuur* for instance, is in contact with NAJK and LTO but not really with the other interest organizations. According to Datema (2021), on average LTO farmers are more positive towards nature inclusivity than NMV farmers. Although LTO has interest in nature-inclusivity they are reluctant to publicly promote it (Datema, 2021).

4.1.5 Cooperatives and Agri-business embedding

The vast majority of farmers are processing and marketing their produce and procuring their agricultural inputs and machinery through large cooperatives. Most farmers in the Netherlands are also financed by the Rabobank which in origin is a cooperative agricultural bank. These cooperatives that once started small and local have grown into large firm-like organizations that have a strong influence on farmer’s decision making today (Interviewee M, 2021). Although these cooperatives have become very large, they do try to stand close to farmers, and maintain personal contact. Cooperatives such as Agrifirm, Friesland Campina, AVB or COSUM have youth councils. Voncken (2020) says these help the cooperatives get a taste of what young farmers think about the future and the direction of the cooperative. A side effect of this rise of large cooperatives according to Voncken (2020) is that farmers have lost much of their entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial skills, and by this process farmers have started seeing their own role more as a producer rather than an entrepreneur. Interviewee M introduces the term “*cooperative thinking*”, which he contrasts with the “*entrepreneurial mindset*”. With the term “*cooperative thinker*” he means the mindset and attitude that farmers have obtained because of the formation of cooperatives in agriculture. This mindset is characterized by the thought that the only role a farmer has is to produce, and that what needs to happen around that: marketing, advertisement, research, lobbying, and so on is done by cooperatives. Interviewee M describes the *cooperative thinker* as a docile farmer, who just follows what cooperatives tell him or her.

Contact with cooperatives and agricultural firms most often takes place through on-farm consultancies with advisors or through information sessions or study clubs. Interviewee M sees the information sessions and study clubs that are organized by cooperatives and firms as a service to keep clients satisfied and engaged, but not as something that will actually help the farmer to move forward. Interviewee M (2021) sees it as a way to make sure that farmers keep buying their products. “*Some more critical farmers have a healthy distrust of such initiatives,*” says Interviewee M (2021), “*they chose to inform themselves through independent advisors.*” Datema (2021) sees many farmers that go to both independently organized information sessions and sessions that are organized by cooperatives. The way of talking and the themes that are addressed differ (Datema, 2021). Van der Mark (2020) expresses his concern about the weak position that farmers have within the food value chain among large cooperatives and other Agri business firms:

“when you look at the pig farming sector from an outsiders perspective you have [...] the compound feed companies and the slaughterhouses, and in between in the farmer. The farmer does not have time to talk and maintain a strong position over the whole chain. But the banks, the compound feed industry, and the slaughterhouses do. They have only one interest, and that is that farmers don’t go left or right,

but just go straight ahead and do what they are told [...] and they have managed to do that by putting advisors along the road who become friends of the farmer” (Van der Mark, 2020). Voncken (2020) sees a conflict arising between sectors where farmers are compliant to- and very dependent on the cooperatives and other sectors where farmers are more independent and *entrepreneurial*.

4.1.6 Agricultural magazines and journals

Agricultural magazines and journals play an important role in shaping farmers understanding of the world. Often they even facilitate online- or offline interactive platforms, creating spaces for opinion-forming and discussion. On top of that, journals have a huge influence on the topics that get attention within the agricultural sector and on the information that farmers get about technological innovations, but also about the societal challenges related to farming. These topics often kickstart discussions within farmers communities on local level or in social media groups (Van der Mark, 2020). The most renowned agricultural magazines in the Netherlands are *De Nieuwe Oogst* (The New Harvest), *De Boerderij* (The Farm) and the various regional and sectoral editions from the publisher *Agrio*. Besides the three big ones, there are multiple smaller, often sector-specific journals *BoerenBusiness* (Farmer Business) is an important online journal that focusses much on the agricultural economic topics.

Different agricultural journals have different styles and appeal to different kinds of farmers. According to (Van der Mark, 2020) professional journals mostly write in a neutral way about topics, but now and then some pieces provoke intense discussions. Voncken (2020) is of the opinion that professional journals are purely informative and unlike commercial newspapers have no political inclination. He sees the opinion pieces as “*by farmers for farmers*” sections which do not lead to dividedness (Voncken, 2020). He says that there usually is a good balance between the viewpoints of nature-inclusive or sustainable farmers and conventional farmers. However, according to Interviewee M (2021) some magazines are not very independent and spread information that is in line with their organizations, as is the case for *Nieuwe Oogst*, which is connected to LTO. Additionally, he thinks traditional farmers are more inclined to the “*traditional media*” which in his eyes are *Nieuwe Oogst* and *De Boerderij* while more “*free thinking*” farmers usually subscribe to editions of *Agrio* which according to him provides more information about innovative ways of farming. In contrast to *De Nieuwe Oogst* and *De Boerderij* who are generalists throughout the whole agricultural sector *Agrio* is focusing more and more on personalized media, even working with persona’s; types of farmers that they write towards. He also mentions that he sees *De Boerderij* as a historically “*high-end status magazine*”, and therefore appeals to traditional farmers. Although he thinks that their journalism is of good quality and independent, he still feels that this origin influences their style. Interviewee M (2021) says that most of the farmers who want to diversify in their agricultural practices have subscriptions to *Agrio*. According to him, *Agrio* is the most independent and innovative publisher of agricultural journals.

Professional journals and magazines are not very popular among young farmers who are still studying or working with their parents. This group is more involved in social media. Professional magazines are being read more by older farmers especially when they start running their own businesses (Van der Mark, 2020; Voncken, 2020). Often farmers who are interested to innovate or change something about their businesses are subscribed to multiple magazines and journals, as they are “*hungry for information*” (Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020).

4.2 FARMER NARRATIVES: SHARED VALUES, MEANINGS, ATTITUDES, SENTIMENTS AND COGNITIONS ABOUT FARMING AND BEING A FARMER IN TIMES OF TRANSITION.

In this study aspects driving collectivity and intersubjectivity within farming communities were investigated through content and narrative analysis of Facebook groups and pages, online footage of speeches, debates and discussions, websites of organizations, letters, publicly published interviews, books, news articles, and interviews with key informants. By identifying the red threads that are dominating public debates and interactions within farmer networks one can learn about the things that bind communities of farmers together through the process of identification with those stories. As much as shared cognitions and understandings of reality bind people together, other identity aspects like values, symbols, meanings, attitudes, sentiments, and social categorizations of in and out groups also play a role in creating a sense of belonging. In this section the second research question (*which shared values, meanings, attitudes, sentiments and cognitions about farming and being a farmer drive collectivity within farming communities?*) is addressed by presenting different topics that play an important role in farmer interactions and public debates. In every subsection of section 4.2 one of these topics is addressed. These red threads are depicted in such a way that the reader gets a sense of the underlying emotions and of nuances around those topics. This provides the reader with a deeper understanding of what lives within farming communities, and it gives insight into the differences that can be found between different networks of farmers.

4.2.1 Proud to be a farmer

Pride about being a farmer is a strong sentiment that is expressed in a multitude of conversations and discussions, slogans, campaigns, interviews and so on. In Figure 4.1. an example is shown of such a slogan. It is often put forward as an inherent reason to support farmers both within farmer circles and by external groups. Agrifirm (a cooperative supplier of agricultural inputs) started the campaign “#Trotsopdeboer” (#Proudofthefarmer) which has been used by many other organisations like *BoerBewust* and and by many individuals in their social media posts (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages, 2020-2021*).



Figure 4.1 A slogan on the website of Agractie Nederland that involves farmer pride (Facebook group Agractie Nederland, Fieldnotes, 2020).

This statement, which indisputably raises strong feelings points to an apparent intrinsic value of farmers by connecting farming communities and is repeatedly mentioned during manifestations. In this section a deeper investigation will be held into farmer pride by looking at the contexts in which this is used in order to gain a better understanding of what this implicit intrinsic value of farmers entails.

The opinion panel website Agri Peilingen (*Agri Polls*) has done a poll among farmers in 2018 on what they are proud about. Although sampling method and exact sample size are unknown, this poll with

more or less 90 respondents does contribute to our understanding of what (some) farmers are proud of. Farming life and the quality of farmers' produce seem to be the most important things to be proud of, whereafter their animals, their partner and the production of high-quality food come. Other aspects of the farming profession like sustainability, farmer traditions, high yields and the quality of the land among other aspects, are perceived by less farmers as the most important things to be proud of (Agri-Peilingen, 2018).

On the Facebook page of *Trotse Jonge Boeren* (Proud Young Farmers) an 18 year old farmer illustrates the elements of farming life he thinks young farmers are the most proud of; *"being on the farm amongst the animals, on the tractor with your colleagues, the moment you open the new silage and smell the delicious odor of the grass or maize that is still perfectly preserved, the moment that a piglet or a goat looks up at you and starts following you with great interest, the beautiful harvest of delicious vegetables or juicy fruits"* (Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021). Another board member of *Trotse Jonge Boeren* wants to *"create recognition for their profession, for the high-quality food that they deliver, but also for the societal services they provide"* (Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021). One of the points of the mission statement of farmer organization *Agractie* is; *"Farmers of the Netherlands are of great importance for Dutch food, landscape and society!"* (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020*).

All of the above mentioned aspects of farming and being a farmer that are considered as something to be proud of by farming communities boil down to two main points: firstly the notion that farming lifestyle in itself is intrinsically valuable, and secondly the appreciation of the products and services that farmers provide for society. Different farmers and different farming communities differ as to which of these aspects are perceived as more or less valuable.

Appreciating farmers for provisions to society

Pride of being a food producer seems to be a shared feeling among a broad range of farmers. However, when looking closer there are many nuances around which aspects of food production are actually valued by farmers. Also, different appraisals of the food producer's role and other roles that farmers take on, result in different expectations that farmers have from society.

Producing food for a growing world population with increasingly modernized urban lifestyles is a role that many farmers are proud of, it is regularly mentioned as a reason why they are important for society. *The few who provide for the many*. A quote from the page of *Trotse Jonge Boeren* illustrates this: *"Because being a farmer is a wonderful profession! We, who are less than 1% of the population, make sure that 99% of the people never have to worry about their basic needs. So they can do their own work and trust us to provide healthy food!"* (Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021). Similar arguments have been found in multiple other sources (*Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages, 2020-2021; Mensink, 2020; Van der Plas, 2019*). The Netherlands is sometimes seen as a world example of efficient and sustainable food production. This is emphasized by some Dutch farmers as something to be proud of (*Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021*).

According to NAJK representative Van der Mark (2020), *production of food for people to eat* is what farmers value most about their work. According to him *all* farmers are proud of that (Van der Mark, 2020). However, he says farmers differ in the value that they attribute to where the food goes. While some farmers attach value to what happens to their produce, others have no idea where it goes and don't really care as long as it is paid for. The second type of farmer has a more commercial attitude. *"Unlike other sectors"*, Van der Mark (2020) adds, *"farmers feel pride in producing a basic need"*, but he sees some are more involved with that than others. Onnes (2020) another representative of NAJK says that generally farmers feel proud when they can see where their products are consumed, for

instance when it is sold in the local supermarket farmers post about it on their social media. He says that that is what farmers would prefer, but in the end it's all about making a “*product of a high quality*” and that's what you're most proud of. Where it eventually goes, that is of less importance (Onnes, 2020).

Datema (2021) thinks that “*the nature inclusive farmer sees him- or herself primarily as a food producer, as someone who produces something that a human being consumes. Whereas a conventional dairy farmer (which he used to be in the past) sees him- or herself as someone who produces milk that goes to the dairy cooperative*”. Datema (2021) says that is different than continuously realizing that a consumer has to buy it. It is the difference between seeing what you produce as food versus seeing it as a product. Often farmers who are engaged in nature inclusive practices deliver directly to consumers, which enhances the value that a farmer attaches to their produce as food for people. It must be noted that the different values that Datema describes can coexist as is illustrated by this quote: “*every three days many liters of milk are transported by truck to Campina. From this 'white gold', our customer then makes many delicious products that are on the table every day for many citizens and also for ourselves: cheese 🧀, butter, milk 🥛, pudding, you name it!*” (Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021). Additionally, Datema (2021) thinks that farmers who move towards more nature inclusive practices realize very well that producing food is one thing, but the way in which you produce it, what effect that has on your environment and on the people in your environment is as important (if not more important) than the food that you produce (Datema, 2021). Onnes (2020) mentions that the production of a *high quality product* is still the most relevant value at the moment, because that is what you get paid for. However, other values are going to become more important in the future.

Of course not all farmers produce food. Many Dutch farmers produce flowers, trees and ornamental plants, but also other raw materials for industrial processes and energy production or fur for example. These other activities and roles logically link with other values than the ones that are attached to the production of food. LTO (representing all agricultural sectors) points to the value of farmers; “*Thanks to the great contribution that farmers and horticulturists make to the economy, employment, the landscape and the environment, the added value of Dutch agriculture and horticulture is undeniable*” (LTO website, Fieldnotes, 2021). Clearly different sets of values are emphasized here; the value that agricultural entrepreneurs (note that LTO often uses this term instead of *farmers*) contribute to the Dutch economy, and their implicitly positive effect on landscapes and environment. Van der Plas, leader of *BoerBurgerBeweging* also highlights the value of farmers as the creators and caretakers of the unique rural landscape of the Netherlands (Mensink, 2020).

It can be concluded there is a diversity of perceptions about the value which is attached to products and services that are provided by agrarians in the Dutch society. Different individuals and groups are attached to different sets of values to a higher or lesser extent. Amongst farmers themselves, the most prevailing values of the products and services they provide are; the value of food for people, the value of high quality produce, the value of contributing to the national economic growth and labor provision, the value of the environmental- and social impact while producing, and the value of preserving the rural landscapes. Attachment to these values often occurs concurrently within a single individual, however the heterogeneity lies in the salience of certain values in relation to others. Some of these implicit values of the farmer-role and their implications will be discussed in the following sections.

Farming as a lifestyle

Oftentimes “*het boerenleven*” (farm life or farming as a lifestyle) is mentioned as something that is inherently valuable and needs to be preserved and protected. It is something that shapes you as a

person and that is part of you, it is part of your personal identity. This section dives into the expressions that show what is meant by this farming lifestyle and why it is valuable.

In a speech during one of the farmer manifestations it was expressed to what extent *farming life* is part of who people are and what they identify with: “*you can take the girl to the city, but you can never take the farm life out of the girl. Although I feel fine in the city, it is only in the countryside that I really feel at home*” (Farmers Defence Force, 2020). This quote shows that the farming lifestyle can be related to a sense of place, a feeling of being at home in the countryside. Another speaker at the farmer manifestation describes farming life as “*working hard, being outside a lot and running great responsibility*” (Farmers Defence Force, 2020). In some other public expressions other values of farming life are described: great freedom, living close to nature and close to farm animals, enjoying the presence of wild animals, the beautiful landscapes (as seen in Figure 4.2) and sensing natural phenomena like the smell of grass are part of what makes *farming life* valuable (Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Farmers Defence Force, 2020; Private Facebook Group 1, Fieldnotes, 2020; Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021).



Figure 4.2 A social media post from a contract worker that illustrates the value of living close to nature and enjoying the beauty of the country-side (Source: Facebook page Boer Bewust, Fieldnotes, 2020).

Something that is mentioned by several farmers is the sentiment of growing up on a farm and the wish that their children and grandchildren get to grow up in the same way. This quote illustrates the value of raising children on a farm; “*...where our children can grow up in complete freedom, and love to help out on the farm. They learn a lot about the animals and nature, and regularly they get so dirty from playing and helping on the farm that they have to take off their clothes at the back door*” (Farmers Defence Force, 2020). The wish of raising your children on a farm is often related to the personal experience of growing up of a farm and the valuable memories that people have about their childhood on a farm, about learning to farm from their parents and grandparents, and how they “*passed on their passion for farming life*” (Farmers Defence Force, 2020). Another aspect of farming life that is often considered valuable is working together with the family and colleagues (Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021).

The farming life and profession is often presented as valuable because it is seen as a meaningful job, that feels rewarding because it often involves much care-taking; of animals, of crops, of land. Many farmers find it enjoyable and rewarding to see their animals satisfied (Farmers Defence Force, 2020; *Private Facebook Group 1, Fieldnotes*, 2020; *Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021). There are many examples where farmers describe an affectionate relationship with their animals, and where they describe happiness that emerges from interacting with them (*Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021). Others mention the joy that they experience by just observing their animals (Farmers Defence Force, 2020; *Private Facebook Group 1, Fieldnotes*, 2020; *Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021). Farmer social media groups contain a multitude of expressions of these sentiments, from poems to pictures, videos and so on.

As mentioned earlier, working hard is often seen as part of the farming life. It is sometimes perceived as a virtue and as something that is satisfying as a personal lifestyle (Farmers Defence Force, 2020; *Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021). Interviewee M (2021) has experienced that sometimes farmers use this hard-working ethos as an argument as to why they should be appreciated by society. He thinks it is sometimes used as an excuse for farmers to not put energy into changing their practices, especially for older generations and more *traditional farmers*; “...for 80, 90% of the generation before, working 80 hours was the standard. They felt comfortable with that. They also got a kind of excuse from that, 'I work hard, why do you do this to me? And “you” in particular is the society...” (Interviewee M, 2021). An agro-ecological farmer also contests the assumption that extended working hours must inherently be linked with farming life (Pakhuis de Zwijger, 2021).

A feeling of freedom that is provided by the rural farming lifestyle is another important element that is valued by many farmers. Onnes (2020) explains that farmers, who spend most of their time on their own land, have a lot of freedom to dress and act in whichever way they want and it won't affect them in doing their job. Farming life is also characterized by certain fun traditions like carbide shooting, which was used in the political campaign of BoerBurgerBeweging as a symbol of connectedness with farming lifestyle (*BoerBurgerBeweging Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021).

Another symbol for the farming lifestyle that can be found in a multitude of media, campaigns and during farmer manifestations is agricultural machinery (*BoerBurgerBeweging Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021; *Boeren da is pas een schoon leven Facebook Group, Fieldnotes*, 2020; Mensink, 2020; *Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021). It is noteworthy that there are many social media groups that are solely devoted to agricultural machinery, both for informative and entertainment purposes. A young farmer describes red as her favorite color because it is the color of their milking robot (*Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes*, 2021). This illustrates how important agricultural machinery is as a symbol for farming identities.

In summary, the farming lifestyle, is perceived as an inherently valuable thing by many farmers. Some aspects of farming life that are perceived as valuable are mentioned in farmer social media groups and events. Expressions about the value of farming life in farming related social media groups often receive a lot of positive reactions from non-farmers and co-farmers. Living with a sense of freedom, enjoying the landscape and living close to nature, living close to animals, and a sense of place that connects farmers to the countryside are some of these valuable aspects. Working hard is considered as part of the farming lifestyle by some, however, this is contested by others. For some groups agricultural machinery and tractors are strong symbols for the farming lifestyle. Another element of farming life that is perceived as valuable, is the teamwork and collaboration among family members and colleagues. Furthermore, there is a sentiment about farming life, the land, and the skills and knowledge that have been passed on from generation to generation and there is a strong wish among many farmers to raise

their own children on farms as well. This is why continuation is a major topic within farming communities. The following section (4.2.2) will elaborate on this.

4.2.2 A threat to continuation

Continuation of farming businesses is considered as a very important, if not *the* most important matter of concern by a broad diversity of farmers. Many farmers feel threatened in their existence and the existence of their family farms and their way of life in the future. This feeling is an important driver which results in farmers uniting themselves in action groups or other groups to promote and defend farming life. Young farmer representative Voncken (2020) from NAJK mentions that in his farm-net-working trips with NUFFIELD this theme came forward as a great concern among farmers worldwide. In reaction to this he decided to pick up this topic as a matter of concern both on a personal note, and within his organization (NAJK) (Voncken, 2020). The weight of this topic within farming communities also becomes apparent in an abundance of internet groups and media where this issue is discussed. Image 4.3 shows an example of how this topic is brought forward within action groups like *Agractie Nederland*. Societal criticism about the environmental impact of farms, and discussions about the amount of livestock in the Netherlands are often perceived as a threat to farmers' existence and the existence of their follow-up generation (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Farmer promotion group *Boer Bewust* also posts images of children alongside with questions about the future in order to express concerns about continuation of family farming businesses (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*).



Figure 4.3 A video posted in the Facebook Group of *Agractie Nederland* in the context of the nitrogen crisis. The text translates to: "Is this the last generation?".

Not only are environmental restrictions mentioned as a threat to farmer continuation, but economic viability of farming businesses is under pressure for many reasons. Low profit margins, very long working hours, hard labor, rising cost prices (Interviewee M, 2021), and increasingly strict legislation (Onnes, 2020) often demotivate young farmers to take over their parents businesses and threaten the continuation of family farms. This pressure on farming businesses and continuation leads to worries, insecurity, fear and anger which result in defensiveness that has fueled the formation of farmer action groups (*Farmers Defence Force, 2020; Mensink, 2020; Onnes, 2020*).

The continuation of family farms into the next generation is a great matter of concern to a diversity of farmers. Social media and other media is full with emotional expressions on this topic, often related

to the problems causing this threat. Environmental regulations are perceived as a direct threat to farmers' existence and the continuation of family farms.

4.2.3 Subordination of farmers

It is often mentioned that measures against nitrogen pollution are targeting the agricultural sector in an unjust manner as compared to industry, housing and roads (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Farmers Defence Force, 2020; Mensink, 2020*). In this thesis this perspective will be referred to as the *green versus grey* narrative because in the data it was often referred to as a conflict of interest between *green* and *grey* landscape elements. The *green versus grey* narrative has had a central role in the farmer manifestations during the nitrogen impasse in 2020 and 2021. *Agractie Nederland* mentions in several posts that the political discussion around nitrogen is used as a way to make land free for housing, industry and roads (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Mensink, 2020*). Caroline van der Plas is, journalist at *Agrio*, is initiator and leader of the *BoerBurgerBeweging* that started as a movement and has become a political party with one seat in the Dutch parliament. Van der Plas wrote the preface of the "*Boerenprotesten*" (Farmers Protests) book by Mensink (2020), saying: "*It was beautiful to see that farmers were completely supported in their protests against government policies to exchange farmers for housing, aviation, and industry. Green has to make space for grey. Because that's what it's about. Also all the political parties made society believe that farmers had to reduce nitrogen for nature. Nonsense. Farmers were just used as spare change*" (Van der Plas in Mensink, 2020). These words from van der Plas illustrate how prominent the "green versus grey" narrative is in certain farmer networks and communities.

Although it has come to the foreground during the *nitrogen crisis*, the *green versus grey* narrative is older. In a forum from the website *Agri-Peilingen*, which does polls among agrarians, somebody commented already in 2018 that the blame for many environmental issues is divided in an unfair manner: "*Fingers are pointed directly at farmers. The farmer has done it. Environmental pollution, decline of nature, CO2 emissions; the farmers are blamed. But people with their cars, many roads, and high living standards, the many flight vacations that are booked are not blamed... I experience that as very unfair*" (*Agri-Peilingen, 2018*).

Critique and scepticism about nitrogen deposition models, measurements, and model interpretations often arise alongside the *green versus grey* narrative. Disagreement about facts and figures and about effectivity of proposed solutions have dominated the nitrogen discussions, whereby narratives about inequality, blame, and deliberate suppression of the farming community have emerged. Section 4.2.7 will further elaborate on this. Van der Mark from *NAJK* explains that a feeling of inequality is stagnating the farmer's will to make changes: "*...if in the Netherlands we are so much about equal treatment regardless of descent, age, female-male, color, race, you name it. Why dont we do that between farmer and industry then?...Farmers do want to change, but if it has to go in such a strange way, and unequal, then change comes to stand still very soon. You are also not going to do chores that you dont like if others dont have to do it*" (Van der Mark, 2020). A sense of unfair treatment of farmers as compared to other sectors, whether legitimized or not, has moved Dutch farmers in the past years (*Farmers Defence Force, 2020; Van der Mark, 2020*).

4.2.4 Distance between farmers and the rest of society

Urbanization, and the decline in the amount of farms in the past decades has changed dynamics between farmers and other citizens. This phenomenon comes back regularly in farmer narratives as the cause of numerous struggles that the agricultural sector is dealing with. According to many farmers this *separation* between farmers and non-farmers has reduced the appreciation for farmers among the Dutch population. Some farmers proclaim that this decline of appreciation has created space in

society for the emergence of anti-farmer narratives, that blame farmers for societal problems and frame farmers negatively. Consequently, repairing this rupture between farmers and non-farmers is seen as necessary to solve problems in the agricultural sector. In the following subsection it will be illustrated how certain groups and networks of farmers engage with these narratives.

A sense of underappreciation

Onnes (2020) says there are different kinds of farmers; those who feel deeply underappreciated and disregarded and those who just feel a little bit underappreciated. But all farmers feel at least a little bit underappreciated. Onnes (2020) thinks the feeling of underappreciation is caused for the largest part by the increased *distance between farmers and the rest of society*.



Figure 4.4 “No farmers no food” a slogan popular within certain farmer groups. (Facebook group Boer Bewust, Fieldnotes, 2020)

The slogan “no farmers no food” implies that there is a dependence of society on farmers, and that threatening the existence of farmers inherently leads to threatened food security. Slogans like these go around in certain social networks of farmers (as seen in Figure 4.4), enhancing legitimacy and confidence in farmer manifestations and discussions. Onnes (2020) says that there is a quite a large group of farmers who have standpoints like: “We feed the world, and people are nothing without us”. These farmers feel very underappreciated (Onnes, 2020).

Onnes (2020) sees that in villages there is more appreciation for farmers than in cities. In villages people actually meet farmers, get the chance to discuss with them and hear all the nuances on agricultural subjects, whilst city dwellers only see farmers on television or during protests on the highway (Onnes, 2020). Receiving critique and getting a feeling that citizens do not appreciate what farmers do sometimes leads to strong emotions like frustration, disbelief and downheartedness amongst farmers (Farmers Defence Force, 2020; Mensink, 2020; *Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page*, Fieldnotes, 2021). A young speaker at the farmers protests says its difficult for her to see her parents affected by disappreciation (Mensink, 2020). Appreciation is one of the things that farmers have asked for during the various manifestations, it is also part of the mission statement of *Agractie* (Agractie, 2020a; Mensink, 2020).



Figure 4.5 A call for appreciation during the farmer manifestations (Mensink, 2020)

Interviewee M (2021) says that the decrease in numbers of farmers in the past decades, and the shrinking of farm family size has weakened bonds between farming families and the rest of society, and therefore the position of farmers within society has changed. Datema (2021) explains the distance between farmers and non-farmers has gone hand in hand with changing modes of production and changes in the food value chain. He explains that until the 80's, farmers produced mainly for local customers, and since the food system has become more industrialized the farmer sells directly to the milk factory. This also implies that nowadays farmers talk more to the milk factory than to the consumer, and get feedback on their work from the milk factory and not from the consumer. Datema (2021) thinks that it is crucial that farmers learn to speak with consumers again, and that they learn about what consumers want. According to Datema (2021), farmers that do not want to change anything,

complain about consumers that they demand all kinds of things but don't want to pay anything. However in his experience, farmers that actively do an effort to approach consumers usually find consumers that do want to pay, so these farmers have a different view on the matter. Datema (2021) sees in his work that farmers who are open to change their practices, have a curious attitude towards what consumers want, and like to explain to consumers what they do. Although sometimes he hears complaints from farmers like *"we do all kinds of things but it is never enough"*, in general farmers who are active around societal subjects have a curious and positive attitude towards consumers.

Blaming, shaming and framing

Oftentimes it is said that farmers are blamed for all the environmental problems, and that they are purposefully being shamed and framed to get a negative image in the media (*Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages, 2020-2021; Mensink, 2020; Van der Plas, 2019*). Agri-Peilingen (2018) collected farmer's opinions about what annoys them most. Almost all reactions relate to unjustified framing through for instance showing outdated images, half-truths, opinions of people who know little about farming or farming life. In the survey farmers complain about media just critiquing farmers and not talking about their contributions to society, farmers being portrayed as criminals, and farmers being portrayed as animal abusers and environmental polluters while not mentioning that these are the people that produce food for society (Agri-Peilingen, 2018).

Purposeful framing and shaming by animal activist groups, environmental organizations and left wing political parties is a major topic of concern to many farmers and farmer organizations (*Farmers Defence Force, 2020; Mensink, 2020; Van der Plas, 2019*). Twenty seven agricultural and meat value-chain organizations have sent a letter of concern to the national government regarding this topic: *"There have been years of systematic stigmatizing and demonizing of Dutch agriculture, fisheries and value chain partners. Because of unsubstantiated statements by various NGOs and deliberate framing by some political parties, an environment has been created in which many partners in agriculture are experiencing increasing radicalizing pressure. There is an environment where supporters of such parties feel supported by their opinion leaders to break the law. In the process they occupy stables, threaten farmers*

and slaughterhouses, break-in, and start fires” (Rossum, 2020). A famous stable occupation in May 2019 in the town of Boxtel, has been influential in collective identity formation around the sense of having a common enemy; after the stable occupation there was a feeling of discontent among many farmers about the mild measures that were taken by the police. This led to the rise of farmer groups that self-organized in order to ‘defend’ themselves from the animal activist groups. *Farmers Defence Force* is one of the groups that originated in this way. (Mensink, 2020)

Reconnecting farmers and citizens

Reconnection between farmers and citizens, and “*telling the real story*” has become an important goal for farming communities and other partners (or allies) in the agricultural sector. This has given rise to a variety of organizations and groups with the purpose of explaining in detail what farmers do and why they do it, telling about the beauty of farming as a lifestyle, telling personal stories with passion, debunking “fake facts” about agriculture, and going into discussion with citizens about agricultural topics. On Facebook, many of the largest farming related groups and pages serve these purposes. Some examples are *Trotse Jonge Boeren*, *Boeren Buren* (Farmer Neighbors)(initiative of LTO North), *Boer Bewust*, *Steungroep Boeren en Burgers* (Support Group Farmers and Citizens), *Agrarisch verweer inspekt het nieuws* (Agricultural defense inspects the news), *Boeren van Nederland* (Farmers of the Netherlands), among many others. *Boer Bewust*, one of the largest farmer promotion groups presents itself like this: “*The Foundation Boer Bewust is committed to promoting agriculture and reducing the gap between farmers and citizens. Conscious cultivation, conscious eating, conscious living, that's what it's all about in conventional arable farming, gardening and livestock farming. High-quality food that has been carefully produced. With that we feed mouths all over the world*” (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). *BoerBurgerBeweging* which started as a social media campaign states in its mission that citizens and farmers have grown apart, and that activist organizations, green NGO’s and green political parties have set up shaming campaigns which need to be counter-acted with the truth about the agricultural sector (Van der Plas, 2019). “*It is about changing the tone and wording*” (Van der Plas, 2019). In the *BoerBurgerBoek* (FarmerCitizenBook) it is mentioned that words as “*landbouwgif*” (agricultural poison) are giving the discussion about pesticides an unjustified bad connotation, and they want to promote the use of the word “*gewasbeschermingsmiddelen*” (crop protection agents) (Van der Plas, 2019).

Agractie states on their website that their main mission is the reappraisal of farmers: “*In the past period, farmers have been portrayed wrongly by one-sided reporting. October 1st was a clear beginning of the reappraisal of the farmer. Farmers in the Netherlands have a mission, a story to tell. The story of producing honest, safe food, with the lowest environmental impact in the world, food from the Netherlands that people in Europe and further away value highly because nowhere in the world is there an area where the cohesion between all value chain parties is so efficient*” (*Agractie, 2020a*). One of the projects that they work on is *Boer in de Klas* (Farmer in the Classroom), where they bring farmers to classrooms to tell school children about agricultural practices and farming life (*Agractie, 2020a*). Other ways in which farmers seek connections with citizens is playing a role in their local communities, for instance by creating entertainment like decorated Christmas tractors, or by helping out the local circus (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Private Facebook Group 1, Fieldnotes, 2020*).

Although the distance between farmers and society is often pointed out as a problem by farmers and farmer groups, sometimes citizens are also seen as the allies of farmers. According to Kemp (leader of *Agractie Nederland*), twenty percent of the people at the farmer manifestations were concerned citizens (Mensink, 2020). According to Van der Plas, the majority of the citizens stand behind farmers; “*This is the silent majority. And that large silent majority does realize that farmers are important to the Netherlands. For a Netherlands where farmers and citizens have been living, working and spending*

time together for centuries. They also realize that the countryside, the backyard of the city-dwellers, is seen by politicians in The Hague as a building site. They also realize that the beautiful Dutch cultural landscape was created and is maintained thanks to the farmers. And that the quality of life in this countryside is under pressure because of the desire to erase farmers” (Mensink, 2020). In social media discussions about farmer protests both support of and critique about farmers are modestly and fiercely present (*Farmers Defence Force Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2020*).

In conclusion, sense of underappreciation is widely felt by farmers and discussed in farmer communities. Often an increased distance between farmers and the rest of society is pointed out as the cause of this problem. Two interviewed agricultural experts see that this sense of underappreciation lives mostly among farming communities that are unwilling to adapt their practices to societal demands and who are caught in a system where agri-business firms and cooperatives influence the paths that farmers take. There is a very strong narrative coming from agricultural circles that the bad image of farmers in society is caused by purposeful framing and shaming by green NGO’s, green and left-wing politicians and animal activist groups, portraying these as adversaries of the agricultural sector. In reaction to this assumed purposeful framing, many social media groups and organizations have emerged with the purpose of reconnecting farmers and citizens. By many farmer organizations citizens are portrayed as potential allies that farmers need in their battle for existence.

4.2.5 Fair incomes and global markets

A major concern that is expressed by farmers along the whole spectrum, is the need of a fair income. Most action groups, and interest organizations or farmer collaboration platforms have this as one of their most important spearheads. This can be illustrated with the following examples: *Agractie Nederland* wrote in its mission statement: *“The Dutch farmer deserves an income that matches his/her function and farm size!”* (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Dairy farming union NMV uses the slogan *“Income, that’s what it’s all about!”*, the *BoerenRaad* mentions in their vision that they want a systemic change wherein the focus shifts from high volumes and low prices to diverse, sustainable and fair systems with fair prices for farmers.

Besides the fact that income has always been something that agricultural producers and unions have fought for, this theme has become an even more pressing matter in the light of the sustainability transition. A famous slogan that is used from protest signs (Mensink, 2020) to formal government reports (Maij et al., 2019) is *“je kunt niet groen doen als je rood staat”* (you cannot “do green” if your balance is negative). Van der Mark (2020) mentions that in his sounding board of pig farmers everybody says *“I’m happy to keep fewer animals, that’s not the problem, it’s not what I’m doing it for. If we earn the same it’s not a problem at all. It’s as simple as that. We just started keeping more animals in order to stay in business. So if they start saying: ‘you can continue to exist with less animals, you have to do something else but you get a good income for it,’ well then you are a damn poor entrepreneur actually if you don’t do that...”* (Van der Mark, 2020).

Although most farmers and farmer groups would agree that a fair income is needed in order to be able to achieve a fair and sustainable agricultural system, views differ about where the root of the problem lays, and how these fair prices for farmers should be achieved. *Farmers Defense Force* has started a campaign and has performed several manifestations and blockades to demand supermarkets to set up a *“Farmer Friendly”* certification system. With this certification, supermarkets would promise to raise the farmer’s share of the final products to three percent (*Farmers Defence Force Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2020*). *Boer Bewust* gave additional attention to these actions by creating and spreading infographics about the low margins that farmers get (see Image 4.6). Although agreeing that a fair income for farmers is important, Interviewee M (2021) argues that the group behind these blockades

(Farmers Defence Force) is fighting a rear guarded action. According to Interviewee M (2021) *Farmers Defence Force* stands for a type of agriculture which yields big farm businesses, with high production for the world market, for low prices, where farmers will remain dependent on foreign countries. This mode of production is incompatible with a better income, otherwise it would have already happened (Interviewee M, 2021). In his view, these “hardcore farmers”, as he names them, are a fierce minority that continues thinking very *traditionally*.

Onnes (2020) and Van der Mark (2020) from NAJK both explain that a good income for Dutch farmers is hard to achieve because on the international market there is no “level playing field”. If the local regulations and production requirements are more strict in the Netherlands than elsewhere, price competition on the international market is impossible for Dutch farmers. Onnes (2020) stresses how dependent he is of the local regulations; “...my neighbor 6 km away in Germany, because he happens to live in Germany can just go on and on. That is close, but of course we have to deal with competition from all over the world. I compete with my wheat against farmers in Russia, in Australia, with my sugar beets I compete with farmers from India and South America. And I am so dependent on government regulation”. Van der Mark (2020) pleads for international agreements on agricultural regulations “And then you as a Dutch politician can start pushing very much that things have to be different, and ehh, regardless of whether they are right yes or no, then you have to first bring about the European level playing field that everybody is in. That everyone is going to do the same thing. And preferably at world level. But that's very difficult, of course.”



Figure 4.6 Boer Bewust showing support for the blockades to request higher margins for farmers from the supermarkets. With the creation of infographics they create awareness about the low shares for farmers. (Boer Bewust Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2020)

Another approach to reach fairer earnings for farmers that is suggested by some groups is to protect Dutch markets against cheaper and lower quality products from abroad. *Agractie* conveys this view in their mission statement; “Dutch food is tasty, reliable and safe, and deserves priority over imported food!” (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Similarly, focusing on local markets is a strategy that’s also conveyed by a whole other group of farmers. *Toekomstboeren* for instance, works on short value-chains and direct sales as a strategy to achieve fairer prices in order to make agro-ecological farming practices profitable (*Toekomstboeren Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Datema (2021) mentions that many farmers engaged in nature inclusive farming also seek more direct forms of sales. Additionally his umbrella organization *BoerenNatuur* is involved in the distribution of subsidy payments for nature inclusivity on farms. What differs essentially between the protectionist perspective and short value-chain perspective is that the

protectionist view does not explicitly articulate the need for any changes in production for export markets, in the value-chain or in production practices, whereas groups like *Toekomstboeren* articulate themselves clearly against agro-industrial regimes with large scale production for the world market and high input rates that are obtained from agricultural input suppliers (*Toekomstboeren Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Production for the world market is often defended with the argument that Dutch agriculture is efficient and sustainable, and yields higher quality products than agriculture in foreign countries (*Trotse Jonge Boeren Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2021*).

All in all, one may conclude that a fair income for agricultural producers is an important topic for a large variety of farmer groups, and all of those groups agree with one another that a good income is necessary for sustainable production. The proposed strategies on achieving a fair income differ from group to group. While *Farmers Defence Force* demands higher margins from supermarkets, NAIK representatives argue that international agreements are needed to establish a *level playing field*. While *Agractie* makes a case for protection of national markets, *Toekomstboeren* and *BoerenNatuur* are more focused on short value chains and payments for environmental services.

4.2.6 Politicians and the government

Within some farmer groups, opposition and sometimes even hostility towards the government and towards politicians is conveyed. Within some farmer circles, politicians are seen as the antagonist: as traitors, as unreliable, ignorant, egocentric, and not caring about farmers (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Farmers Defence Force Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2020; Mensink, 2020; Van der Mark, 2020*). These types of denunciations are targeted both to specific politicians personally and *the government*, or *politicians* generically. The Dutch minister of agriculture Carola Schouten has been a major target of all kinds of accusations. It is worth noting that these sentiments towards politicians have played a major role in the rise of the farmer manifestations that started in 2019. The first message that went around to recruit supporters for the protests said: *“we are more than tired of being portrayed as environmental polluters and animal abusers by politicians, in the media and by activists. We are fed up with the unreliability of government and institutions, which has led many of us into serious trouble. We are tired of all the problems of this country being shoved on our plates. We are going to let that be known in The Hague! (Sept. 12, 2019)”* (Mensink, 2020).

The most prevalent accusations that have been mentioned during manifestations and in social media groups are overregulation, inconsistency and ignorance about agriculture and nature. Sometimes politicians are accused of having perverse incentives. This section will elaborate on some public expressions by farmers and farmer groups about politicians in order to get a better understanding of the reasonings and sentiments accompanying them.

Overregulation and discontinuity

The following quote was taken from a speech during the “Code-oranje” (code-orange) manifestation that was organized by *Farmers Defence Force*. This speech shows the type of insecurity farmers feel towards the future with ever increasing regulations around agriculture; “...ever more constricting and limiting measures. As soon as the weather permits it, our cows go out into the fields. Will we soon have to apply for a permit for that? Do we have to ask whether they are allowed out to pasture at all? And what if the water level will be raised on our land? Will they still be able to go out to pasture? Or only for a short period of time? Will we still be able to work our land with our machines? What kind of stable adjustments will we have to make and will we be able to afford them?” (*Farmers Defence Force, 2020*). This quote illustrates in how much disbelief some farmers

are about regulations that affect their practices and their habitual course of events on the farm. Onnes (2020) from NAJK explains that farmers are dependent on an incredible amount of regulations which can change within a really short amount of time. He says that makes things very uncertain for farmers as insecurity causes people to go into a defensive mode (Onnes, 2020). Alongside with increasing farm regulations comes increasing state control, which is also something that farmers are worried about. With ever-changing regulations and standards, the risk of non-compliance is high and that makes farmers reluctant towards being transparent, even if they have many good practices on their farms that they would like to show (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Onnes, 2020*). Image 4.8 shows young farmers taking action to request space within rules and regulation to be able to continue farming.

According to Van der Mark (2020), what has given rise to the current wave of resistance is not just a couple of changing regulations, but rather a substantial change of policy direction for the agricultural system. He explains; “*The farmers who started in 1970/1980, who took over from their parents who had the first really modern tractors, the synthetic fertilizer farmers [...] they were told; ‘okay guys, you’re doing it all wrong, it has to be efficient, and cheap, and you have to grow to keep your head above the water. We’re going to get rid of the small farms [...] so start growing.’ Well, they have all done very well. Maybe too well [...] Now many years later, the same group of farmers is also being told, (the old supporters of LTO, the FDF farmers, to put it bluntly); ‘Yes, what you have done, we do not want anymore, and now it must be completely different.’ Well, that is actually saying to a farmer, your whole life’s work has been in vain and you have to start all over again. [...] And they actually thought that if we just do what they say and get a subsidy for it, (especially the dairy farmers and the arable farmers) they’ll be fine. That’s the way they wanted it, what politicians wanted at the time, what Europe wanted. And now they’re actually being told; [...] you’ve screwed up’, that’s what they’re being told literally in a political sense.*” According to Van der Mark (2020) politicians don’t consider this historical background of the situation enough. Van der Mark (2020) says that politicians tend to look too much at the present situation and societal discussions that are held in the present day because that is also

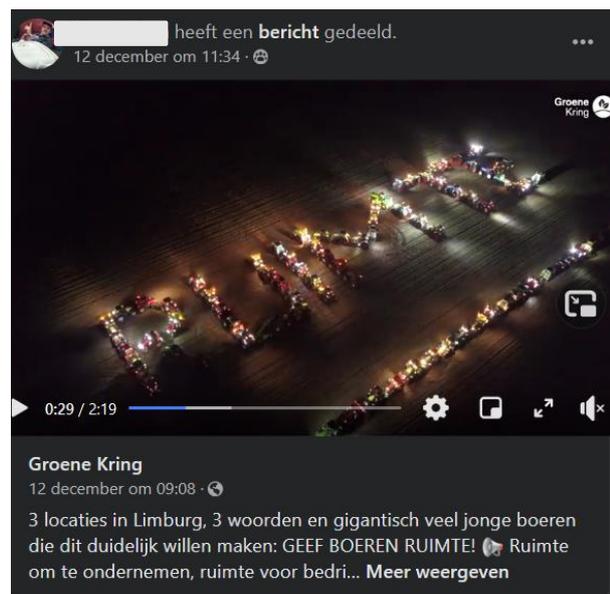


Figure 4.7 Action of young farmers asking for space for entrepreneurship. (Private Facebook group1, Fieldnotes)

what affects their own stakes. Van der Mark (2020) thinks that politicians prioritize egocentrism above societal interests. Interviewee M (2021) sees it a bit differently: he thinks the new wave of resistance within certain groups of farmers is mainly rooted in frustration about losing grip. According to Interviewee M (2021) the political influence of farmers has strongly decreased in the past decades. Because of this, the “farmer agenda” has become less prominent in the political landscape, leading to dissatisfaction amongst those groups who are no longer so influential (Interviewee M, 2021).

Ignorance and perverse incentives

As already mentioned in section 4.2.4 some politicians and political parties, especially green and left wing parties, are accused of strategically collaborating with NGO's and activist groups to frame farmers in order to get societal support for their political agenda's (Mensink, 2020; Van der Plas, 2019). For example, it was insinuated that research on the relationship between COVID-19 reproduction rates and intensive livestock farming was done solely with the purpose of getting rid of farmers and to make use of their land for other purposes (*Farmers Defence Force Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Besides suspecting perverse motives from politicians, often politicians are portrayed as ignorant and reckless; making decisions about agriculture and related issues without having enough knowledge about it (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Farmers Defence Force Facebook Page, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Voncken (2020) thinks that there is too little knowledge among politicians about good practices in the agricultural sector, and about all the problems that farmers are already tackling in their day by day work. According to Voncken (2020) politicians don't want to hear about these things because they have their own assumptions about farmers, and that's where he thinks a fruitful discussion gets stagnated.

Negotiation and collaboration

Although some farmer groups have great critique on the government, there are also groups that collaborate closely with the government like *BoerenNatuur* (Datema, 2021). Other organizations like LTO and NAJK have a long negotiation history with governmental institutions. The willingness to negotiate with the government, and style of negotiation varies between action groups and interest organizations. The collective of farmer organizations that emerged as a result of the nitrogen impasse, namely *Het Landbouw Collectief*, turned out to have difficulties in coming to an agreement on how to approach negotiations with the government (Hallema, 2020; Onnes, 2020). Especially collaboration with *Farmers Defence Force* appeared difficult during negotiations.

In summary, tension between farmers and politicians have played an important role in igniting farmer manifestations. The most prevalent accusations towards politicians that have been pronounced by farmers are overregulation, inconsistency and ignorance about agriculture and nature. A turn-around in policy direction as compared to the past decades has struck many farmers in what they have built during their lives, resulting in frustration and anger. Sometimes politicians are accused of having perverse incentives. Within some farmer groups left-wing and green politicians are seen as an adversary, whereas other groups are more attuned to collaboration and open negotiation.

4.2.7 Perceptions on environment and nature

To understand the attitudes that different farmer groups and communities have towards sustainability transition in agriculture, their viewpoints, attitudes and sentiments towards nature and environment are crucial. In this section the narratives about nature and environment that have been found within farmer networks will be presented. Firstly general attitudes towards nature, environment, and environmentalism that stood out will be presented, then the roles farmers envision for themselves in relation to nature will be discussed. Hereafter some popularly disputed truths about nature and

environment are highlighted. Finally narratives will be presented about the most discussed nature and environment related topic in Dutch agriculture today; the *nitrogen crisis*.

Attitudes toward nature and environmentalism

The narratives going around in farmer circles about nature and environment range from seeing nature, environment, and environmentalism as an opposition to farming, to seeing it as an integral part of farming. Sometimes both these extremes are even mentioned within the same groups. It was mentioned by Interviewee M (2021) and by a young farmer on the *Trotse Jonge Boeren* platform that studying environmental sciences is seen as something controversial within farmer circles. This exemplifies the general taboo around the topic of environment within some farmer communities. By some farmer networks, nature is seen as an adversary because poses a threat to their existence (see section 4.2.2). Nature is not only seen as the reason why agriculture and other sectors have to compete for emission space (*green versus grey* narrative as described in section 4.2.3), but nature is sometimes also a direct competitor of agriculture. In some farmer groups and networks the intrinsic value of particular nature areas or wildlife species are perceived as less important than the intrinsic value of farming (as described in section 4.2.1). The concept of “*wensnatuur*” (translated in this thesis as *nonsense nature*) is increasingly used in discussions, referring to protected nature that is ‘arbitrarily’ appointed, and ‘unrealistic’ to be actualized (Mensink, 2020; Nederlandse Melkveehouders Vakbond, 2021). Mensink (2020) cited spokespersons of the action group Farmers Natura 2000; “*if these areas are declared sacred, and it looks more and more like it, there will be no place at all for farming in Winterswijk. It is then simply a matter of swallowing or suffocating. A very bad state of affairs.*” This quote shows the way the farmers in this action group perceive the appointment of these Natura 2000 areas as a direct attack to their existence.

Although “*wensnatuur*” is something that these activist farmers are against, it seems that they do not perceive themselves as opponents of nature altogether. Often (also during protests), farmers portray themselves as caretakers of nature and historical rural landscapes (Mensink, 2020). In the mission statement of *Agractie* it is mentioned that farmers are crucial for the Dutch landscapes (*Agractie Nederland Facebook group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). A speaker at the *Code Oranje* protest said that farmers have a better understanding about what is good for nature than citizens and politicians (*Farmers Defence Force, 2020*). Farming promotion page *Boer Bewust* posts that “*all farmers take care of their soils, because a good harvest starts with a good soil*” (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). It is often said that farmers already do a lot for nature and for the environment (*Diverse fieldnotes of Facebook groups and pages, 2020-2021*). It often said that Dutch farmers are already doing very well when it comes to animal welfare, often augmented with the conception that farmers are very much engaged with their animals (see section 4.2.1) and know much better what is good for them than other people (*Agractie Nederland, 2020b*). Voncken (2020) says farmers are already tackling many nature and environment related problems through the natural course of events on farms, but this is not recognized by society or by the government. Van der Mark (2020) says that many farmers mention the uptake of CO₂ by the land as one of the examples of how farming is already contributing positively to resolving climate problems, and as one of the reasons why it does not make sense to blame the farmers for climate change. Van der mark (2020) is of the opinion that for the production of a basic need, some emissions are inevitable and necessary. Within some farmer groups and networks, restoration of nature is seen a major aspect of farming itself, for example by introducing and managing more natural elements on farms such as trees, wild flowers, hedges and more (*Datema, 2021; Toekomstboeren Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). Farmers on the nature inclusive side of the spectrum are more aware that the environmental effect of what you produce is as important as the product that you actually produce (*Datema, 2021*) (also see section 4.2.1). Voncken (2020) says that farmers at different sides of the sustainability spectrum have doubts about one another, but in general they don’t

disapprove of one another. Voncken (2020) worries about the hype around sustainability and related open-ended definitions. He fears that, possible greenwashing could take place where farms engage in attaining a green image without showing congruency in their practices.

Van der Mark (2020) says that the attitudes of young farmers towards nature and environment really differ per theme; animal welfare is something that most young farmers care about and want to improve in, nitrogen and climate are often seen as bureaucratic problems. When it comes to soil pollution, Van der Mark (2020) thinks that there is a knowledge gap, that things are still too unclear. When looking at soil pollution, equality with regard to regulations targeted at agriculture as compared to industry is something that young farmers care about according to Van der Mark (2020), to what extent the sewage contributes to soil pollution as compared to farmers is not clear he says. Voncken (2020) says that involvement with nature and environment differs very much among farmers and is mostly related to the family background, and how somebody was raised.

Disputed facts

In the content analysis, it came forward that many online discussions between different groups of farmers, supporters and other citizens revolve around disputed truths. An example of these discussions is; whether soybean meal is a residual product, and therefore whether Dutch cattle farming results in deforestation elsewhere or not (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). There are discussions about whether synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides are necessary to produce enough food for the world population, and whether manure should be considered as a valuable resource or as a pollutant (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020; Toekomstboeren Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). It is a hot topic whether farm animals in modern stables have better lives than farm animals that live outside, and whether city-dwellers project a romanticized view of wild animals on the wellbeing of farm animals or not (*Agractie Nederland, 2020b*). Another disputed topic is the fate of male calves (*Private Facebook Group 1, Fieldnotes, 2020*) and the effects of removing calves from the mothers (*Boer Bewust Facebook Group, Fieldnotes, 2020*). On social media platforms, the discussions about these disputed topics range from very polite wherein mutual understanding stands central, to discussions wherein insults and curses are used to ridicule the other. By far, the most disputed truths on farmer social media platforms and other media in the time frame of the data collection of this research are facts and figures about nitrogen pollution and the *nitrogen crisis* in the broader sense of the word.

The Nitrogen Crisis

In this sub section various standpoints and sentiments related to the *nitrogen crisis* will be presented to illustrate the positions that exist in this discussion, and thereby exemplify the variety of stances towards nature and environment.

Onnes (2020) says that there is a group that recognizes the problems and are of the opinion that also farmers, like everybody else in society, must contribute to the solution. However, there is also a group that sees that rules are different elsewhere, and that in the past there was no problem. According to Onnes (2020) these farmers see the problem as something that was created by ourselves, for instance by creating the Natura-2000 areas. By some farmers nitrogen air pollution is referred to as *the "fictional nitrogen cloud"* (*Farmers Defence Force, 2020*) or as a *"paper issue"* (Van der Mark, 2020). Onnes (2020) finds it difficult to estimate how large the group is that sees the nitrogen pollution as an unreal problem, he says that these kinds of groups make a lot of *"noise"* and therefore are often overrepresented in societal debates. Van der Mark (2020) says this group is actually the majority of farmers, especially among young farmers. Datema (2021) thinks that the group of farmers who really believe that there are no environmental problems related to nitrogen is a really small group, just several

individuals. Discrediting the environmental problems related to nitrogen pollution is not done only by protest groups but also by some interest organizations (Nederlandse Melkveehouders Vakbond, 2021), some other interest organizations do not completely discredit the nitrogen problems, but they do take a critical stance towards the modelling approach and the numbers that are used in policies and regulations (LTO Nederland, 2021; NAJK, 2021).

Mathematical modeling techniques that are used to calculate the critical deposition values in nature areas are one of the most criticized aspects of the *nitrogen crisis*. Protests have been held at the RIVM (National institute for public health and environment) because farmer groups *Agractie* and *Farmers Defence Force* claimed that the models which state that agriculture is accountable for the largest part of nitrogen deposition are false or interpreted wrongly (Mensink, 2020). Some protesting farmers even mention that they think this is done on purpose to favor other sectors at the expense of farmers (Mensink, 2020). Two agri-sector funded research institutes, *Agrifacts* and *Mestdagfonds*, supported the scepticism about the RIVM models with their revision of RIVM numbers; according to them, agriculture wasn't responsible for 46% of nitrogen deposition but only 25% (Food&Agribusiness, 2020). These numbers suggest that farmers were disproportionately blamed and accounted for nitrogen deposition. Revisions of these numbers on the other hand, show that this was a false claim, and that accuracy of RIVM estimates of nitrogen deposition remained usable for policies on nitrogen cuts (Braakman, 2020). At the *Code Oranje* manifestation of *Farmers Defence Force* Jan Cees Vogelaar explains that *Agrifacts* and *Mesdagfonds* will continue to critique the "stupid" nitrogen deposition models (*Farmers Defence Force*, 2020). He says that if the RIVM would use German models, the *nitrogen crisis* in the Netherlands would be solved for the next 10 years (*Farmers Defence Force*, 2020).

In conclusion, there seems to be a wide ranging sense that farmers stand close to nature, take care of nature, and manage it. However, what that exactly entails seems to be where different groups of farmers differ from one another. Disagreement about facts and figures about nature and environment related topics dominate the discussions that are being held with and between farmers. Especially in scepticism related to the nitrogen deposition models, protected nature areas, and about effectivity of proposed solutions have dominated the *nitrogen crisis* discussions. Thereby narratives about inequality, blame, and deliberate suppression of the farming community have emerged.

4.2.8 Transition and change in agriculture

Dutch farmers operate in a society where there are many forces driving them towards a transition, or a change. Views on what that change entails differ from individual to individual, and from group to group. But, also the attitudes that farmers have towards change in general is very different. Mindset, personality traits, personal circumstances but also identification with certain views about farming and being a farmer influence this attitude towards change. In this research all these characteristics that are either conducive to or hampering change are a main topic of interest. Although some of these characteristics may have already been described in the previous sections in the context of specific narratives, this section focus more concretely on narratives that reveal attitudes towards change as a topic in itself. Next to some general conclusions that can be deduced from the content analysis, this section is constituted mainly on reflections of key informants on farmer's views and attitudes towards change.

Words like change and transition are regularly referred to in the context of agriculture, by persons both in and outside the agricultural sector, and are an important point of attention in contemporary politics. However, views on what this specifically entails are extremely diverse. Some see this "change" as a series of technological developments that will help reduce the negative environmental impact and animal welfare concerns related to present-day agricultural practices. Technological adaptations to increase the sustainability of farming practices are already in full progress for many years. These

technological innovations have had huge impact in reducing emissions and pollution per unit of production, and may possibly provide solutions for more problems in the future. The technology oriented view of transition is partly shared by Van der Mark (2020), he believes that the problem of CO₂ emissions will be solved by technological innovations in the future. In contrast to this technology oriented perspective, others believe that the “change” is about new economic models through diversification (for instance by selling niche products, organizing events on farms, or getting involved in local tourism) (Interviewee M, 2021; Van der Mark, 2020). Others focus more on change that is focused on direct sales and shorter value chains (Datema, 2021; *Toekomstboeren Facebook Group, Fieldnotes*, 2020), and/or more nature inclusivity (Datema, 2021). Although the last three perspectives on what *the change* entails differ in their main focus when compared to the technology oriented perspective, they are not exclusive of technologies being part of the solutions. Interviewee M (2021) thinks that more automation will be part of the new farming practices on a diversified farm; stepping out of the *working 80 hours a week* paradigm. (Interviewee M, 2021) says it’s not about working hard, but about working smartly and efficiently, adapting to the market and changing marketing strategies and adapting to the potentials of the surroundings. Onnes (2020) sees that transparency is becoming more and more important. These narratives illustrate that the necessary change that is envisioned for the agricultural system differs among groups, in dialogue about transition of agriculture it may therefore be useful to be specific about the viewpoint that one refers to.

Overall attitudes towards change

Onnes (2020) says that when you chose to become a farmer, then you chose for a specific lifestyle. Changing practices implies a big change in day to day life for farmers, and some people will not want to change their lives drastically. Therefore, they resist that type of change whilst others will be fine with that. Some farmers are just afraid of change, feel insecurity and want to hold on to what they know (Interviewee M, 2021; Onnes, 2020; Van der Mark, 2020). Interviewee M (2021) calls these farmers the “*security searchers*”. Van der Mark (2020) stresses that for many, the sense of unfair treatment of farmers and anger blocks their openness to new things. Voncken (2020) stresses that the negative image that some people in society have of farmers does not motivate young farmers to be the change that the world needs: “*it has to happen in the countryside [...] then first farmers have to start seeing themselves as the solution, but then you have to be treated like that*” (Voncken, 2020).

According to Interviewee M (2021), the most important aspect that determines if a farmer is open to change is intrinsic motivation. He has observed that farmers that have changed their practices are often very satisfied; “*it is fun to change things if you’ve done the same thing for many years*” (Interviewee M, 2021). Working closer to consumers is also experienced as fun according to Interviewee M (2021) and Datema (2021). In contrast, Interviewee M (2021) noticed that many farmers who are holding on to “*old*” practices are often dissatisfied because of societal critique and unfavorable circumstances for their farming businesses.

Interviewee M (2021) says that another important factor that withholds some farmers from changing their practices are the judgements of other farmers in the surroundings. However, this has become less important in the past 5 to 10 years (Interviewee M, 2021). Social networks especially families strongly reinforce the view of what is *good farming*, or even what is *real farming* (Interviewee M, 2021; Van der Mark, 2020). There is a weighty perspective within farming communities that diversification or nature inclusivity is not *real farming*; “*such a transition to not really a standard farm anymore, so no pigs, or no dairy cattle, that is still seen by a large group of farmers as, well, not really success. That's kind of a side step. Then you're actually, to them, you're not a farmer anymore... You see that a large group of farmers is still very entrenched in the idea that, you are a farmer if, for example, you milk a*

hundred cows. Or if you have 5000 pigs. That's it, that's the perception of being a farmer" (Interviewee M, 2021).

Voncken (2020) and Interviewee M (2021) say that the same applies for young farmers; *"...you see that there are a lot of people who want to be entrepreneurs and do it that way. But you also see that a lot of people, especially young farmers, just want to milk cows, they just want to farm. Or they want to grow potatoes, or just pick apples. They just want to be farmers, because that's actually what a farmer does, he takes care of his cattle, or of his land, and they don't want to be so involved with the whole marketing and that sort of thing, which is a slightly different type of activity...therein you see a very big problem, that's where a big piece of frustration begins for many... they actually just want to be farmers, but that way they are not really accepted anymore. That feeling is present to some extent"* (Voncken, 2020). Interviewee M (2021) says that among young farmers there is less fear of the unknown (so less *security searchers*), however there is also a strong attachment to family traditions, especially in conservative families. According to Interviewee M (2021) about half of young farmers that are born into traditional farms are open for change and the other half holds on to the *"standard way of farming"* as he calls it. Interviewee M (2021) and Van der Mark (2021) both mention the importance of women in the step towards diversification. Often the female farmer takes the first step to do something different on the farm, but she also plays a role in motivating the whole family in doing something differently (Interviewee M, 2021; Van der Mark, 2020). However, at the same time doing something different than *"regular farming"* is sometimes perceived as a woman's job (Van der Mark, 2020). The divide in cultural acceptance of alternative agricultural practices is reinforced by the fact that farmers often-times form connections and networks with like-minded farmers (Interviewee M, 2021). Datema (2021) says that what stagnates the transition towards more nature-inclusive farming is the big gap between the radical frontrunners, and the ones who are a couple of steps behind that. This gap entails frontrunners being judgmental of farmers who are not completely nature-inclusive or pesticide free (yet), and conventional farmers who find the examples of frontrunners too unrealistic for their own farms (Datema, 2021).

Besides the above mentioned sentiments about transition in agriculture, there are also some more practical reasons that influence a farmer's attitude towards change. Van der Mark (2020) explains that for a change to happen in the direction of diversification a lot of different skills are required from farmers, for instance in communication and networking. To obtain these skills, and to build a network a lot of time is needed which many farmers simply don't have (Van der Mark, 2020). Interviewee M (2021) says that some farmers don't have the means for changing, such as the necessary academic level to be able to make such a step. Furthermore, he adds that many farmers do not have sufficient capital to make an investment in setting up something new, and he stresses the importance of transitional financing for this group of farmers (Interviewee M, 2021). Section 4.2.5 already elaborated on the importance of a fair income to achieve a transition, and the different views on how that fair income should be achieved. Depending on the type of change that is envisioned, the scale of that needed transitional finance and therefore the perceived agency of the individual farmer are different. Besides financial feasibility, the surroundings of a farm are of major importance as well; in very non-touristic regions that are far away from urban areas, many diversification strategies will not work (Interviewee M, 2021). On top of that, farmers in these remote areas usually have already specialized in large scale production more than other farmers (Interviewee M, 2021). Datema (2021) explains that farmers in some regions are more inclined to adopt nature inclusive practices because environmental conditions hamper large scale, highly productive agriculture. Often farmers in these less productive regions already have experience with more nature inclusive practices (Datema, 2021). Voncken (2020) observed regional differences that underline this, he says that young farmers in some regions of the Netherlands are much more inclined to support the protests and resist any kind of change than in other areas. He

adds that it also differs a lot per sector, depending on the extent to which their futures are under pressure (Voncken, 2020).

So in conclusion the attitudes of farmers towards the idea of change and transition are diverse and so are the reasonings behind that. While some are afraid of change or are blocked by anger, others experience change as fun and exciting. A commonly mentioned feeling is that certain alternative ways of farming (especially diversification strategies) are simply not perceived as real farming by many farming communities and therefore not seen as desirable options. The gap between frontrunners and farmers that are a couple of steps behind that forms an obstacle for many farmers to engage in alternative farming practices. Furthermore many practical factors hamper change, like the lack of certain skills, time, capital, the right surrounding conditions, or insufficient academic qualifications that make some development pathways possible.

The entrepreneurial mindset

Entrepreneurship, or an entrepreneurial mindset is often portrayed as something valuable, as a good trait of farmers. The word entrepreneurship contains some ambiguity; where by some it is used to describe success in achieving high production rates, for others it means to think out of the box and adapting to the market (Interviewee M, 2021). However, several of the key informants in this research referred to it as an important characteristic that “*innovative farmers*” have (Interviewee M, 2021; Van der Mark, 2020; Voncken, 2020). Voncken (2020) describes entrepreneurship as thinking consciously about how to make the most money with your product instead of just following what the big cooperatives tell you to do, or let them do the marketing for you, finding new marketing strategies, local sales for example. Van der Mark (2020) characterizes the entrepreneurial mindset with stubbornness and foresightedness, not following the herd, doing it your own way. Interviewee M (2021) is of the opinion that in the agricultural sector entrepreneurship is a little bit exaggerated: farmers attribute it to themselves while not really being open towards improving their marketing strategies for instance. He thinks that “*cooperative thinking*” (as explained in section 4.1.5) has restrained farmer’s entrepreneurial mindset; “you see that the cooperative, that network that they’re trapped in on the one hand, it kind of caps off their entrepreneurship. On the other hand you do see that they want to be that entrepreneur, but then don’t act on it” (Interviewee M, 2021). Van der Mark (2020) sees that in present day agricultural education, young farmers are being bombarded with entrepreneurial skills. This makes him optimistic about change of the agricultural system in the near future (Van der Mark, 2020).

Ambiguity around the term entrepreneurship is brought forward by several interviewees, they observed that some see good entrepreneurship in agriculture as achieving high production rates, whereas others see it much broader; including aspects like marketing and opening up to innovative ways of selling produce, being sensitive to the socio-economic environment and responding to that. By some interviewees the embedding in cooperatives of the past decennia is seen as something that has decreased the entrepreneurial mindset among the farming population. Entrepreneurship is seen as an important characteristic of innovative farmers who pursuit change and therefore a relevant topic in the sustainability transition.

4.3 SYNTHESIS: FOUR ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITION

In this part of the results section an attempt is made to sketch the landscape of Dutch farmer’s identities classifying Dutch farmers into social categories. As one of the main research aims is to show the heterogeneity within the landscape of farmer identities there is a need for a multidimensional lens through which we describe that landscape. What this means in practice, is that there is not a single

aspect or a main aspect in which farmers in the Netherlands differ from one another but actually there are multiple. During the interviews that were held with key informants these different aspects in which communities of farmers differ from one another had special attention. With open questions like “*what do you think are the biggest differences between farmers?*”, “*how would you categorize different kinds of farmers?*”, or “*do you see significant divisions within the landscape of Dutch farmers?*” the *aspects of difference* were researched. This yielded a list of characteristics in which farmers differ from one another, where some of these characteristics were mentioned more regularly than others (see Appendix 1). If one would create a theoretical multidimensional field with all the aspects of difference a certain position within that multidimensional field could be described with the use of ideal types: a person or group of persons that embodies a number of characteristics. Sometimes some of these ideal types have labels in everyday language. Studying some of these labels that are used to describe ideal type farmers may give an indication of which aspects of difference regularly correlate in reality or at least are perceived to correlate in reality. Therefore, the ideal types that were stumbled upon in the data were used to inform the categorization of Dutch farmer identities. It is important to note that the descriptions of these social categories are based on narratives that are strongly binding some groups and networks of farmers together, creating a shared understanding of reality. This does not mean that farmers identifying with some aspects of one category cannot also identify with aspects that are predominant in other categories.

Describing different ideal types of farmers in the Netherlands is a challenge because of the numerous aspects that have come forward during this research in which farmers differ (see Appendix 1). The method that was used for the categorization of farmers into the four social categories was a product of the operationalization of identity (into different aspects: cognitions, feelings, attitudes, sentiments, norms, values, meanings, in and out group categorizations and relations). The aspect of difference that was most interesting for achieving the research aim, namely *attitudes towards the sustainability transition* was used as the main identifier for the categories. The descriptions of key informants of the landscape of Dutch farmers were used to inspire the four categories that were eventually created. The other aspects that constitute identity were used as a framework to order the cohering narratives that were found within the data. It is based upon the reasoning that different aspects that constitute a social identity must cohere, as they theoretically are what binds a specific social network or community together via shared narratives and intersubjectivity. The cohering narratives were fitted within one category creating shared discourse and shared identity, by connecting the pieces of narrative into a larger story. The connection between those pieces of narrative was done through the identification of common narrators (organizations or individuals who tell different parts of a larger story which they have internalized), the descriptions of the larger stories by key informants, and the positionality diagrams of interest organizations and the rationales behind them (Appendix 2). Despite the multiplicity of aspects in which farmers and groups of farmers differ from one another, some coherence and consistency was found.

Present-day farmer struggles around the sustainability transition, earning capacity and societal pressure are major topics where the positionality of farmers differs, and where collectivity within certain sub-categories comes into being. Multiple times in this research, division and fragmentation of the agricultural sector has been pointed out (Datema, 2021; Interviewee M, 2021; Onnes, 2020), although by some the sense of division is perceived as more severe than by others. Fragmentation happens when opposing interests and attitudes start weighing so much that they become irreconcilable. Shrinking of LTO, which is traditionally the broadest and largest agricultural labor union (Interviewee M, 2021), and the struggles within the newly formed collaboration among different interest organizations in *Het Landbouw Collectief* (Onnes, 2020) point out that farmers struggle in finding a broadly accepted collective approach to the challenges in the agricultural sector. Around these different stances within

the societal discussions new collectivity comes into being. This collectivity brings about the formation of social identities, and in some cases these social identities bring about actions and evolve into collective identities. As mentioned in the theoretical framework (Chapter 2), collective identity can be defined as “*an interactive and shared definition produced by a number of individuals (or groups) concerning the orientations of actions, fields of opportunities & constraints in which the action is to take place*” (Owens 2006, p.226 cited Melucci 1996, p.70). This can be observed through the formation of new organizations, groups and collaborations and by the shared intersubjectivity within different networks of farmers. Informed by the farmer narratives (as presented in section 2) and the viewpoints of key informants, a description was made of four categories of farmers on the basis different stances that farmers have towards the sustainability transition.

The four categories of ideal type farmers that will be presented in this chapter are named according to their attitudes towards change and transition. These are: 1. *The resisting farmers*, 2. *The awaiting farmers*, 3. *The orienting farmers*, and 4. *The pioneering farmers*. Note that the formation of these categories is a synthesis wherein coherence among different elements that bring about collectivity and intersubjectivity are used to describe a hypothetical category of farmers. Such elements which constitute group identities are attitudes, meanings, sentiments, values, narratives, cognitions representation, and relations to other groups (alliances and adversaries). Because the first and the fourth category are more outspoken on (social)media there is more (primary) data to describe these categories as compared to the second and third categories. The two middle categories will be described in lesser detail and more on the basis of the interviews with key informants.

4.3.1 Categorizing the landscape of attitudes towards change

As described in this section there are different mindsets and attitudes towards change. In this subsection the perceived divisions and subcommunities, as regarded by the key informants, will be discussed and visualized in Figure 4.8. Note that estimations are made by informants of the sizes of certain categories of farmers, these numbers are not quantitatively researched but together give us some insight into how the key informants perceive the socio-cultural landscape of Dutch farmers, helping to creating categories in this thesis.

Often the landscape of farmer attitudes towards change is simplified in to two main groups; those who are open for change, who change along with the zeitgeist, and those who are angry about the course of events around agriculture in the last decades and resist changes (Interviewee M, 2021; Van der Mark, 2020). Interviewee M (2021) names it the *traditional* or the *old farming* and the *new farming*. Interviewee M (2021) says that there is tension between these two groups, but when the societal stress on the agricultural sector is high they find each other, sharing a common opponent: the society or the government. Voncken (2020) also describes the main subdivision among young farmers as those who go to protest and are done with it and those who are very ambitious, have a positive stance and want to get to work. According to Van der Mark (2020) it is difficult to estimate the amount of young farmers that are actually engaged with the protests, because there were many young sympathizers at the protests who were not actually farmers but contract workers or teenagers who went there for the thrill. Van der Mark (2020), later also describes three main groups; “*You always have frontrunners that will change, you have the middle group that will come behind them, and then you have the ones lagging behind who will not change at all, or eventually they will*”. In his analysis, Interviewee M (2021) includes this *middle group* as well. In his view, 40% of Dutch farmers are already working on the transition and is having fun with that, he says that 20% of farmers is orienting on a shift, and 40% is not willing to change. This 40% that is not willing to change is putting pressure on society to demand a *license to produce* in the same way as they did before. Interviewee M (2021) says that the *middle group* is incredibly “hungry for information” and is actively orienting on what they should do.

Datema (2021) describes the landscape a bit differently and in more detail. According to him there is a very small group of about 5% that are frontrunners, this means they do something radically different. Out of this 5% about half has a non-agricultural background. There is a group of more or less 20% that stands quite far away from this radical frontrunner group. This group is very countiously and actively bussy with how they should develop their farms in the light of current societal challenges. Then he describes a group of about 40 percent of farmers whith a *wait-and-see attitude*. This group does feel that something is going to change but they haven't gained sufficient knowledge about the matter yet. This *awaiting* group experiences unclarity about the matter, being informed by their classical informants from their cooperative suppliers and costumers, or other conventional advisors, and getting mixed messages from govenmental institutions. Then there is a group of about 20 to 30 percent with a *defensive* attitude. This group feels attacked in their way of farming by all the changes, and that causes resistance. Besides that there is a very small group that negates the existance of environmental and climatic problems, Datema says that this is a very tiny group comparable to climate denyers in the rest of society. When it comes to nature inclusivity about 20 percent of farmers in the Netherlands do something with it but only 10 percent have made big steps. According to Datema (2021) many farmers realize that a lot needs change in agriculture, but they struggle with understanding what they exactly have to do in order to do it differently. Datema says, the interest in nature inclusivity is continously growing. The amount of members of *BoerenNatuur* grows proportionately with the subsidies that they receive for payments (Datema, 2021).

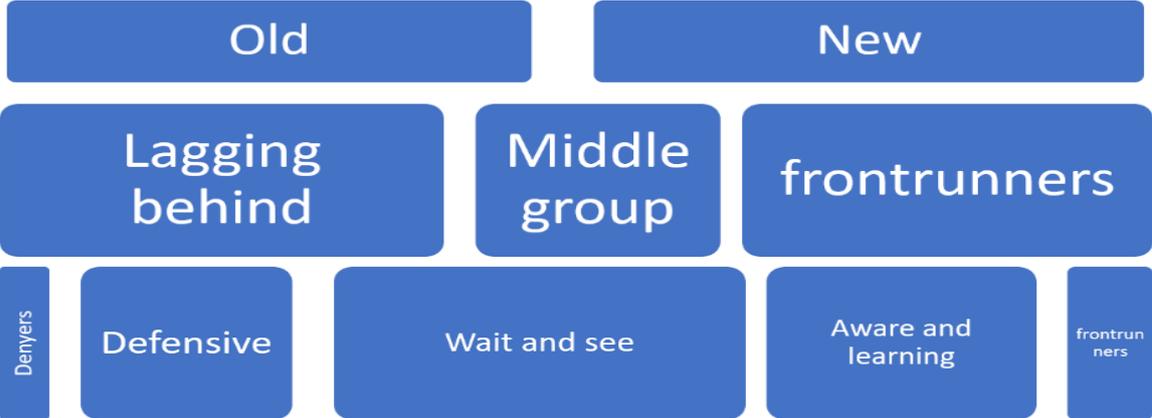


Figure 4.8 The landscape of attitudes towards the sustainability transition as described by different key informants.

4.3.2 Resisting farmers

The most outstanding category of farmers that can be described on the basis of the collected data are the *resisting farmers*. This category is described here as *those farmers who resist the sustainability transition, and disagree with societal arguments to do so*. Over the past years a collective feeling of dissatisfaction and anger among farmers has evolved into the creation of action groups, a series of actions and more radical voices protecting farmer stakes in political arenas.

Narratives and cognitions

Within these groups, farmers often perceive framing as one of the biggest problems. It is harming the image of farmers which in turn leads to a wrong societal view of the agricultural sector. This image is affecting citizens and politicians and turning them against farmers. These negative images of farmers (spread by politicians and other stakeholders with perverse incentives) make space for political decisions that can eradicate agriculture from the Dutch landscape to make place for other things such as industry and housing ('green versus grey narrative').

According to this category of farmers, (the severity of) the environmental crisis that so many stakeholders in society are talking about seems to be exaggerated. In the first place it seems rather unrealistic that city-dwellers who did not grow up in rural areas understand nature better than those who have spent generations outside. Besides that, policies and critiques against farmers that are justified by environmental degradation are based on models and numbers of which the accuracy is debatable. Especially with the knowledge that the same stakeholders who intend to frame farmers are involved in producing those numbers.

The way forward, is through reconnecting farmers and Dutch citizens, and restoring a mutual understanding about agriculture. The solutions that this category works towards is to unframe farmers, by emphasizing their importance for society and by teaching citizens about their practices which, according to many farmers in this category, are already contributing in many ways to a good world. On top of that, the production standards in the Netherlands are way higher than elsewhere, so inherently by farming in the Netherlands one is sustainable. These higher standards result in difficulties for Dutch farmers to compete on the world market. Therefore politicians must work on establishing a level playing field, or Dutch markets must be improved through increased margins for farmers coming from retail or through the protection from cheap and inferior import products.

Emotions and sentiments

As mentioned earlier, collectively felt emotions and sentiments have played a large role in mobilizing farmers and getting them on the streets. A defensive attitude strongly characterizes *the resisting farmers*. There is a strong sentiment that the environmental movement is a direct threat to the existence and the continuation of the agricultural sector, the rural landscape and farming traditions. Not only the environmental crisis forms a threat, but also the underappreciation, which is seen as a result of the disconnect between farmers and citizens, is perceived as a threat. It is felt to be reason that there is a decrease in the space for farmers in society and the willingness of people to pay for their valuable products has decreased. There is a strong sense of anger against environmentalists and politicians who have led farmers to the point where they are now, and misled citizens to agree with that. Underneath these feelings of anger and defensiveness, lays fear because the sector is under high pressure and farming family's futures are insecure.

Values

Highly ranked values for this category of farmers are traditional farming and producing high quality produce. In this case, traditional farming means highly productive, large scale agriculture. The value of farmers in society is that of producing high quality produce for the world market, contributing to the Dutch economy. The value of Dutch farmers as food producers for the world is also regularly mentioned by this category of farmers.

Representation and relations

This category of farmers clearly voices the identification of perceived adversaries or even enemies of the farming community. Green and left-wing politicians, environmental organizations and environmental or animal rights oriented activist groups are pointed at for having perverse incentives and being the groups that create trouble, insecurity and pain that farmers are going through. Hate towards these groups is often expressed. "The government" is often also perceived as an adversary, especially not as an ally for the farming community because it has broken their trust through the political and regulatory changes in the past decades. Therefore exerting pressure through direct action is seen as a necessary means because negotiations hardly lead to satisfactory results.

Within the category of *resisting farmers* there is the critique on traditional interest organizations that they are being led too much by the ideas of the government and that they are not defending the

interest of farmers enough anymore. Therefore many farmers within this category have abandoned the traditional interest organizations and have brought about new organizations and platforms to voice their standpoints. *Farmers Defence Force* is the most notorious organization in this category, and although more dialogue and negotiation-oriented, *Agractie* is also representing this category of *resisting farmers*. *Boer Bewust* and *BoerBurgerBeweging*, are more focused on the issue of reframing farmers. However, one could argue that their narratives around the problems of the agricultural sector cohere well with the category of *resisting farmers*. Many organizations and groups who voice narratives, sentiments and values that fit within this category affiliate themselves with large firms in the agro-food industry, as can be seen in the publicly announced sponsorships on their websites and media platforms. Although it can be seen as a traditional interest organization, NMV, the dairy interest organization voices a critical stance towards environmental problems related to nitrogen, and this fits within this category.

4.3.3 Awaiting Farmers

The second category of farmers that will be described here are the *awaiting farmers*. This category of farmers can be defined as: *Those farmers who experience fear and insecurity as a reaction on the sustainability transition, and perceive circumstances as insurmountable obstacles that first need to change in order to be able to change their own practices*. This category has somewhat similar characteristics in terms of emotions and values as compared to the *resisting farmers* category, however they strongly differ in how they approach the issue and how they see their own roles and the roles of their allies.

Narratives and cognitions

Awaiting farmers are characterized by the narrative that others have to create the circumstances for them in order for them to be able to change. Political arenas are pointed at to create the right (economic) conditions for farmers to make changes on their farms, and to tell them what type of changes should be made on their farms. Mixed and unclear messages from government spheres show that there is no clear direction where one has to go, and therefore it is not possible to make any good step. In the view of *awaiting farmers*, the absence of a level playing field in the EU makes it impossible to produce sustainably without going bankrupt, and the lack of willingness to pay fair prices among consumers indicates that citizens do not really want agriculture to change. The technological advancements and sustainable innovations in the agricultural sector in the Netherlands have already made big steps in the past decades, so it is not clear why many citizens and politicians are so extremely critical of farmers. Farmers do good work, they produce high quality food. In the eyes of the *awaiting farmers* it is the role of their interest organizations, banks and the agricultural cooperatives together with governmental organizations to negotiate the paths and the funds that are needed for an agricultural transition.

Emotions and sentiments

Within this category of farmers annoyance is felt about the continuously changing rules and regulations that are making their farming practices more complicated and more expensive. On top of this, a feeling of frustration prevails about the change in direction of the policies, which used to steer towards upscaling and intensification and now seems to be turning around. Besides this shift of policy direction as pushed forward by the ministry, farmers receive a multiplicity of messages from different political sides and from advisors, cooperatives and banks. This diversity of messages and stirring directions creates a sense of confusion among farmers within this category. Dissatisfaction and sadness are commonly felt emotions in reaction of societal critique. Among the *awaiting farmers* there is fear for the sustainability transition, it brings a lot of insecurity and instability for their way of life, their families and their family legacies. *Awaiting farmers* want to hold on to what they know. Farming within the

context of present day crises, brings along a lot of stress and insecurity that causes desperation among many farmers, this feeling is present within the category of *awaiting farmers*.

Values and meanings

Awaiting farmers are strongly oriented on just doing their jobs, they value the farming lifestyle and farming practices in a traditional way, the way they know it. Working hard, just milking cows, growing potatoes, or growing apples. This is how they perceive the farming way of life is, and how it should stay. Within this category of farmers farming family traditions are strongly valued and there is a strong wish for the following generation to keep farming. Living in the countryside, close to nature and in relative freedom, are valued aspects of farming life too. Besides family traditions, local networks especially with neighboring farmers are of high importance for the category of *awaiting farmers*.

Representation and relations

In the eyes of the *awaiting farmers* category interest organizations, cooperatives and, conventional advisory bureaus are their trusted allies as well as advisory bodies, and representatives. Although this group is less radically antagonizing environmentalists as compared to the *resisting farmers* environmentalists, green political movements and environmental organizations are seen as an out group, and somewhat frowned upon. Animal activists are often seen as enemies for they form a direct threat for many farmers or colleague farmers (who are mostly seen as allies). Citizens who critique conventional farming practices are also seen as adversaries. Citizens who sympathize with the farmers and share their appreciation for the agricultural, and rural lifestyle are their allies in these difficult times.

Representation of this group is largely done through traditional interest organizations such as LTO, NMV, POV, NPV and NAV but also to some extent *Boer Bewust* and *BoerBurgerBeweging* resonate with the narratives and sentiments of this category of farmers. Most traditional interest organizations are working lobbying political change that will enable farmers to have fair incomes and produce sustainably. However, they differ from one another as to the role of the government and their views on the free world market. Many young farmers that are part of NAJK also fit within this category.

4.3.4 Orienting Farmers

The third category of farmers that will be described in this chapter are the *orienting farmers*. This category is defined as: *Those farmers who recognize and care about the environmental crisis, and understand that change will be inevitable. However they are still orienting themselves and learning about how to change their practices.* This category includes both farmers who are intrinsically motivated to orient themselves on innovation and those who see it as an inevitable necessity to continue farming towards the future. Although both categories two and three are a bit nuanced and are both 'middle groups', the two are clearly differentiated by their perceptions of obstacles to change; there *awaiting farmers* focus more on obstacles that hamper change, *orienting farmers* focus on the possibilities to change and on the ways to overcome those obstacles.

Narratives and cognitions

Among *orienting farmers* there is a sense of awareness and acceptance of the need for change. Things are often said like: "Whether we want it or not, the word is changing, and we as farmers will need to adapt ourselves". *Orienting farmers* have the viewpoint that throughout history farmers have always needed to adapt to changing circumstances, and that farmers will manage to do this once again in the current period of the sustainability transition. Increasingly consumers are voicing the wish for agriculture to change, and *orienting farmers* think that as a true entrepreneur one must listen to the wishes of the surroundings. In the eyes of *orienting farmers* innovations are needed, but there is not a clear

direction yet. These innovations may be technological, or within different aspects of farming like business models, farm management or diversification of activities of the farm.

Emotions sentiments and attitudes

Orienting farmers are characterized by their curiosity. They do not resist a change in their lifestyle as a consequence of changing practices. They have an open attitude towards the new, and have willingness to attain new skills if necessary. Although enthusiastic about all the possibilities, *orienting farmers* still experience a sense of unclarity about what their next steps need to be. These farmers are hungry for information to come to an understanding of the way forward, and have a ‘wanting to get to work’ attitude.

Values and meanings

With *orienting farmers*, entrepreneurship, in the sense of thinking out of the box and adapting to the market, is seen as a virtue. For this category being adaptive is seen as part of the farming lifestyle and of being a good farmer. Although family ties may be very important to these farmers, holding on to family traditions in farming practices is not that important. It may even be the case that the entrepreneurial mindset is a family value for *orienting farmers*.

Representation and relations

This category of farmers is not very attached to specific cooperatives, firms, or farmer organizations to show them the way. However, they take advantage of all possible parties that are able to provide them with information about the transition in agriculture, whether mainstream, non-mainstream, environmental or agricultural organizations. Agricultural journals and media are important for these farmers. Colleague farmers that are in the same process are seen as allies and as an important information source on what works and what doesn’t work. Being in dialogue with citizens about what they want is also an important element of their learning process.

This category of farmers is partly represented by various organizations. These farmers are represented by organizations like *BoerenNatuur* and *BoerenRaad*, where they group together with pioneers, but also by more traditional interest organizations such as LTO, POV, NVP and NAV. These more traditional organizations used to represent the majority of farmers, however the more extreme ideal types (1 and 4) don’t feel well represented by them anymore because they have trouble choosing sides. Within these “traditional” interest organizations there is usually a tension between a more proactive stance within the sustainability transition (by its more *orienting* members) and a more defensive and passive stance towards the sustainability transition. NAV clearly voices the need for sustainable innovation in agriculture, but at the same time points at the necessary political change that is needed to achieve this change.

4.3.5 Pioneering Farmers

The fourth and last category of farmers that will be described on the basis of the data that was gathered in this research is the category of *pioneering farmers*. This category is described as: *Those farmers who have radical views on how the agricultural system needs to change, and experiment with outside-paradigm practices on their farms*. Depending on who you ask, and how you interpret “radical” this group is bigger or smaller. In the viewpoint of this group their role as a farmer in society is to take a leadership role in the sustainability transition and to create change by doing things differently.

Narratives and cognitions

In the eyes of farmers that are categorized here as *pioneering farmers*, large scale, highly specialized, high input-dependent, world market-oriented agriculture is unsustainable. Traditional stakeholders and economic views within the agro-industrial regime that are not capable of bringing forward a truly

sustainable way of farming need to be abandoned. In the eye of the *pioneering farmer*, politics, large corporations or big cooperatives are not likely to initiate the necessary transition in the agricultural sector, therefore the ones to take a leadership role in this change have to be the farmers themselves. In the perception of farmers within this category, farmers and environmentalists can be one and the same thing, the urgency of environmental degradation is recognized and conveyed. Distance between farmers and citizens is seen as an obstacle for change to happen. However, citizens are also seen as the audience that is there to be inspired and as the necessary supporters for pioneering practices. “Change” of the agricultural system is viewed in a broad way. Besides the use of alternative management practices on farms, it involves new economic models, diversification, more direct sales and shorter value chains and/or more nature inclusivity.

Emotions and sentiments

Within the category of *pioneering farmers*, the emotional connection with nature is an important driver for doing what they are doing. Unlike other categories of farmers, environmentalism is not perceived as a threat to their existence but rather is the threatened environment perceived as a threat to existence as a whole, including that of farmers. These emotions result in intrinsically motivated farmers that are strongly driven by the notion that they need to contribute something to the resolution of planetary decay. On the other hand, the sentiments around nature and environment sometimes result in sadness about the state of the world, and in anger and resistance against the agro-industrial regime (sometimes also against farmers who are engaged in that regime). Yet, as practitioners of the (in their eyes) future-proof ways of farming these farmers seem to be hopeful about the future and enthusiastic about what they are doing. In contrast to many other farmers, this group is characterized by a great openness towards change and new ways of farming.

Values, meanings and attitudes

In contrast with other categories of farmers, *pioneering farmers* are not so strongly influenced by opinions of surrounding farmers. This category of farmers is often less attached to ties with farming families and the views on agriculture that come along with that. The value of “traditional farming”, in the sense of intensive and highly productive which is often conveyed within farming families, is not acted upon by *pioneering farmers* (often they have a non-agricultural background). However, sometimes there are ties with peasantry traditions, which are not related to large-scale and highly productive agriculture. Farming as a way of life is strongly appreciated by *pioneering farmers*, just like most other types of farmers. However in their perception, connection with and respect for nature and animals is a key element of the farmer way of life. These *pioneering farmers* are often characterized as stubborn, doing things their own way.

Producing food with low environmental impact is a highly appreciated virtue for this category of farmers. There is a strong meaning in producing food for people to eat, and it is often valued to have a connection with consumers. *Pioneering farmers* therefore often invest in (local) networks of consumers and also attribute themselves an educative role within those networks or even in society at large.

Representation and relations

(Local) consumers are the indispensable allies for *pioneering farmers* for they are usually dependent on them. For this category, environmentalists and environmental organizations are sometimes seen as allies too, as collaborations often emerge. Collaborations also exist with scientific- and governmental institutions, either through knowledge creation, funding or both. Although *pioneering farmers* often see the government as an important agent in transforming the agricultural system, it is also viewed as an obstacle to do so. Corporate interest and paradigm-based rules and regulations regularly hamper radical change.

In the eyes of *pioneering farmers*, Agri-business firms and large cooperatives are often perceived as adversaries for they hamper fundamental change in the food system, mislead citizens through green washing, and strongly influence mainstream farmers to continue business as usual. Big firms that are part of the food chain collect substantial margins of what farmers produce and influence farmer's decision making, thereby sustaining a situation wherein farmers are struggling for decent incomes and stay dependent on these firms to continue their businesses. Eliminating dependence on these firms is often part of the agenda of *pioneering farmers*, besides occasional direct critiques or actions against them. This antagonism against agro-industrial corporations and agro-industrial practices also involves that *pioneering farmers* are sometimes distanced from other farmer who do fit within the mainstream farming practices. Antagonism towards strongly agro-industrial embedded farmers is regularly voiced by farmers in the *pioneering* category. An organization through which this group is represented is *Toekomstboeren*, to some extent *BoerenNatuur* and *BoerenRaad* are organizations wherein this category is present, however these are also inclusive of less radical farmers.

5 DISCUSSION

The aim of this research is **to deepen our understanding about Dutch farmers' identities and their effects on the future of the agricultural system**. In order to reach this understanding three research questions were formulated whereby 1. the process of farmers' identification with different social networks was explored, 2. narratives were analyzed to explore what drives collectivity within farming communities, and 3. Ideal typical categories were created wherein social identities of farmers could be described on the basis of cohering narratives about the sustainability transition and corresponding identity traits. In the following section it will be discussed to what extent these research questions have been answered and how the applied research methods have contributed to that. The results for each research question will be reviewed in the light of other findings in scientific literature, evaluating to what extent they cohere with other research and reflecting on their meaning within the wider scientific discussion. Thereby, this thesis may raise new questions or hypotheses for further research. This chapter is concluded with an overall reflection on the methods and research design that were used in this thesis, and to what extent they have contributed to accomplishing the research aim.

5.1 SRQ1: WHICH SOCIAL NETWORKS AFFECT THE IDENTITIES OF DUTCH FARMERS AND HOW CAN THEIR INFLUENCE BE CHARACTERIZED?

Through content analysis and through interviews with key informants an investigation was done to find out which social contexts play a role in shaping Dutch farmer's identities, and how these social contexts play that role. The categories of social networks that influence farmers' identities in the Netherlands that were identified were: families, local networks with farmers and non-farmers (but mainly with colleague farmers), study groups and collectives with colleague farmers from local- to national breadth (but more local), in a broader sense there is social embedding in agricultural cooperatives and agri-business firms with whom farmers work together, and there are interest organizations representing farmer's stakes which have a tiered structure from national to local levels. Besides that, present day farmer social contexts in the Netherlands are increasingly taking place virtually through social media platforms (especially for younger farmers). On social media platforms there are a wide range of virtual social environments that farmers are part of. On the platform Facebook six main categories of social environments were found. Among the largest Facebook groups the categories promotion, action, and commercial prevailed. Aside from that, it was noticed that agricultural journalism takes on an increasingly interactive shape, and can increasingly be seen as a social platform in the agricultural sector as well. It is shaping farmer's identities by influencing the topics about which farmers exchange opinions and feelings.

Intimate social spheres

The way in which these contexts influence farmers' identities can be visualized through certain layers; at the most intimate level farmers identify with their families and the shared meanings and cognitions that are propagated through this family structure. It is mentioned several times in the data that the family has the strongest effect on the farmer's identity. When viewed through Stryker's model on identity theory (Owens, 2006), one could explain the strong influence of families on farmers' identities through the high level of relational commitment of farmers to their families, spending much time effort and resources on family relationships, and attaching strong emotional significance to the people in this social network. This strong impact of families on farmers identities could explain the dominance of the *continuation narrative* in the societal discussion around farming. Through Stryker's lens, the salience of identities invoked by local networks of farmers- and non-farmers, study groups, and local divisions

of interest organizations and collectives is also dependent on the amount of time, effort, and resources a farmer chooses to invest in these social networks, and the emotional attachment there is to the people in these social networks. The data shows that this varies a lot from individual to individual, but most farmers do participate in at least one of these kinds of social networks. Additionally, from some interviews it was learned that farmers often have a preference to stick to farmers in their local social environments and often like-minded farmers stick together too. This results in the social bubbles wherein certain types of farmers reaffirm each other and continue propagating the same identities within their social contexts, hampering the adoption of new identities. In their research on entrepreneurial learning Seuneke et al. (2013) mention the difficulty of farmers to adopt new identities, or re-develop their identities into "*entrepreneurial identities*". This phenomenon could possibly be explained by the formation of these social bubbles. Besides that, Seuneke et al. (2013) mention how difficult it is for farmers to "*cross the boundaries of agriculture*". This idea coheres the findings in this research of farmer's sticking to farmers in their social interactions.

Social embedding in larger structures

On a different level, larger structures like agricultural cooperatives, firms, interest organizations and advisory bureaus affect farmers' identities too. Several interviewees mentioned that there is a strong embedding of farmers into these structures. They argue that these structures largely affect the culture of agricultural communities and that they have a large grip on farmers' behaviors and beliefs. This phenomenon was named "*cooperative thinking*" by one of the interviewees. This interviewee argues that "*cooperative thinking*" makes farmers docile. Agricultural organizations influence farmers' identities directly by spreading, financing and propagating certain narratives in public and semi-public spheres and (social) media platforms (as can be empirically supported with the data in this research). Thereby they speak to a farmer's sense of belonging on a larger scale, but in a less intimate way than their direct, local relationships. One would expect lower salience of the identities related to these larger social structures due to low levels of relational commitment and emotional significance attached to individuals in these social networks as compared to the more intimate and local networks. However, it seems that in the agricultural sector, these larger social networks seep through into the more intimate social-contexts as well. This happens through personal contacts with farmers, on-farm consultants and the facilitation of many study groups and (social) events. This strengthens the relational commitment and emotional significance that farmers attribute to these larger agricultural organizations as social networks, and thereby increases the salience of the associated identity traits.

Furthermore, the cultural influences of these larger social structures in the agricultural sector have been consolidated in farmers' identities through tradition. The existence of cooperatives and especially interest organizations have a prominent place in agricultural history already since the beginning of the modernization of agriculture in the Netherlands in the 1950's (Frouws, 1990). Ever since, these larger organizations influenced farmer's identities through a system that Frouws (1990) calls "*agricultural corporatism*". He describes this as a system wherein formally recognized interest organizations have a close relationship with the state, hereby the state provides direct influence on policies while the interest organization provides an intermediary structure between the state and the farmers and ensures mobilization and control of the constituency (Frouws, 1990). Frouws (1990) characterized the "*agricultural corporatist system*" as non-democratic, hierarchical, disciplinarian, oppressive, internally-oriented, and unidimensional, whereby the pluralism that characterizes Dutch farmers is completely overthrown by the negotiation of a single *common interest*. This has shaped Dutch farmer's behaviors, views, and understandings about farming and being a farmer, aiming towards a common agenda: the development of a productivist agriculture (Frouws, 1990). Despite the fall of the old interest organizations in the 1990s, the idea that the corporatist culture that Frouws (1990) describes is still largely present in relations between farmers and large cooperatives, firms and contemporary interest

organizations seems plausible on the basis of the narratives that were found around the concept of “*cooperative thinking*”. The data in this research also shows that “*traditional*” values are often propagated within farming family structures and local farmer networks, and strongly shape farmer’s identities. It may be hypothesized that the influence of larger social structures, such as interest organizations and cooperatives, on farmer’s identities is strengthened by the cultural values in the intimate spheres that have been established through a disciplinary corporatist history in agricultural communities in the Netherlands.

Virtual social networks

The results of this research teach us something about the position social media networks have in farmers’ lives, and additionally it gives us a peak into the variety of social contexts on Facebook that farmers participate in. Multiple interviewees have mentioned that social media plays a role in connecting farmers around certain topics, and that it facilitates learning, innovation and knowledge sharing. Burbi and Hartless Rose (2016) have shown in their study that social media plays an important role in knowledge diffusion for alternative farming practices in the UK. Social media, and internet communication of farmers is also mentioned by Westerink (2020) in a study about adoption of nature inclusive practices in the Netherlands, she mentions that this enables exchange among farmers across a larger distance, and social networks become less place-based, resulting in the creation of subcultures. This could mean that identities that are invoked by local networks may become less salient, if remote networks are becoming more prevalent in farmers’ lives. Something else that this may bring about, is that the *social bubbles* which were mentioned earlier could be strengthened by this development, for it becomes easier for farmers to interact more with like-minded farmers, even if they are not in their vicinity.

Several interviewees mention the misguided image that social media can give of farmers, they stress it is not representative, that some types of farmers are overrepresented, that younger generations are overrepresented, that sensational- or extreme topics are more prevalent, and that it is full of fake facts. The ideas that social media can be misleading, that it creates an unbalanced images of reality, and that it can propagate and reproduce fake facts are not new, and not restricted to the agricultural sector. There are major concerns about the effects of social media on society as a whole. There is a growing body of evidence that on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, content linked to more extreme ideas reaches more people, and that there is increased polarization in society through mechanisms called *filter bubbles*, or *echo chambers* (Napoli, 2018; Spohr, 2017). Within these *filter bubbles* users are receiving algorithmically generated personalized feeds with content that is similar to the content they have already seen before or to the content that their contacts are seeing, this results in users seeing increasingly one-sided content, creating a bigger divide between people who have different ideologies (Spohr, 2017). *Social bubbles* are also enhanced by social media algorithms that suggest the connections that users should make (Nikolov, Oliveira, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015). Furthermore, the increased circulation of fake facts and the decreased possibilities for governments to act upon that, has been a topic of increased attention in scientific research (Napoli, 2018). It is note-worthy that some agri-business firms are involved in the sponsorship of online media platforms that spread certain types of narratives, as was observed in the data of this research.

The digital age influences identity formation among (especially young) farmers, facilitating the formation of collective identities that engage in direct political action. On the basis of general impacts of social media on society and the developments that have been observed in the agricultural sector, one may hypothesize that social media has strengthened more extreme collective farmer identities and increased polarization within the landscape of farming communities, and that it is reasonable to assume that this process is influenced by agri-business interests. Because the future will probably be even more virtual and action upon environmental issues by the agricultural sector will become even

more acute, it becomes increasingly important to obtain better insight into the processes by which social media shape farmer identities and to what extent social media platforms are being used by third parties to influence farmers' standpoints.

5.2 SRQ2. WHICH SHARED VALUES, MEANINGS, ATTITUDES, SENTIMENTS AND COGNITIONS ABOUT FARMING AND BEING A FARMER DRIVE COLLECTIVITY WITHIN FARMING COMMUNITIES?

In this thesis it was found that the shock of the *nitrogen crisis* has induced strong emotional reactions among farming communities. Anger, fear, desperation, defensiveness, and a sense of unfairness lives amongst many farmers. The *nitrogen crisis* is perceived as a threat to the continuation of family farms and cultural legacies. The content analysis on social media was dominated with narratives that portray farmers as victims of framing by perversely motivated environmentally-oriented antagonists of the agricultural sector. This has given rise to farming promotion campaigns as an attempt to un-frame or re-frame farmers and action groups to defend farmer's stakes. All categories of farmers address the need for fair incomes but differ in the strategies that are proposed to get there, some of which fit better within the present day world-market dependent agro-industrial regime than others. Standpoints and attitudes towards environmental issues and nature among Dutch farmers differ much from topic to topic. Disputation of facts and figures dominate societal discussions about environmental problems related to agriculture in the Netherlands. This calls for more dialogue among scientists, farmers and other stakeholders whereby consensus about facts and a shared understanding of the situation are necessary before interventions can be properly negotiated.

Little other research was done on the present day sentiments and narratives that live among farming communities in the Netherlands. The newspaper *Trouw* has performed a large survey (N=2162) (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019a) which gives us some comparative material. According to this survey 95.3% of farmers feel threatened in their businesses by the *nitrogen crisis*, more than 71.3% feels represented by farmer actions, and 65,3% feels represented by *Farmers Defence Force* (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019a). 72% Of farmers said they would probably vote for *BoerBurgerBeweging* during the elections. The minister of agriculture, the prime minister and the chair of LTO score low in popularity. Young farmers are more extreme than average, as a larger fraction of them feels represented by the action groups. 77.8% of Dutch farmers disagree with shrinking the livestock population, and 73.5% says that nitrogen is a non-existent issue. The numbers that come forward in the survey of newspaper *Trouw* suggest that the narratives that were found in the social media content analysis are dominant among the largest part of the farming population. This would suggest that the disclaimers that were posed by the key informants, namely that this is just a small group of extreme farmers, are disputable. However, one must take into account that the survey by *Trouw* was performed at the end of 2019 when the "*nitrogen crisis*" and the farmer protests just started, key informants, which were interviewed towards the end of 2020 and beginning on 2021 say that the popularity of the action groups declined over time. Another theory could be that the survey of *Trouw* circulated within the same circles as those that were used for this research. Possibly these are easily reachable farmers that are fanatical in giving their opinions. Although this research is not able to give clarity about the fractions of the farming population that identify with certain social identities, it does draw a detailed picture of the narratives, standpoints, emotions and the nuances therein. Stryker's idea that personal identities are multiple and dynamic (as explained in theoretical framework of this thesis) would cohere well with the hypothesis that action-, or resistance associated identities were invoked during the period that the *nitrogen crisis* unraveled.

A hypothesis that seems realistic on the basis of this research and that of *Trouw* (Bouma & Marijnissen, 2019a), is that the *nitrogen crisis* has increased the salience of resistance-, anti-environmental, and anti-governmental social identities amongst farmer communities, giving rise to collective identities that engaged in direct political action. Research on collective identity formation as described by Owens (2006) emphasizes the importance of the process of sharing emotions as a key aspect of creating a shared identity and the mobilization of people for action. The social media environments that were researched in this thesis clearly provided a fertile ground for this process of collective identity formation. This research is not able to give clarity about the fractions of the farming population that identify with certain social identities, however it does draw a detailed picture of the narratives, standpoints, emotions that have driven collective identity formation among farming communities and the nuances therein.

5.3 SRQ3: HOW CAN THE LANDSCAPE OF DUTCH FARMERS BE CATEGORIZED ON THE BASIS OF COLLECTIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITION?

Research question three was answered insofar as possible. However, it is strongly stooled upon the perspective of the key informants. Within the rest of the data, one of the categories (*resisting farmers*) was most likely overrepresented and data on the other categories was rather poor, therefore it was difficult to ground the other three typologies on a varied and large pool of empirical data. This implies that the categorization that was made based on ideal types should be seen as a tentative categorization that needs further steps of verification before holding ground for practical applications such as policy making, other forms of stakeholder analysis or as a theoretical lens in future research.

The method that was used for the categorization of farmers into the four ideal typical categories was a product of the operationalization of identity (into different aspects: cognitions, feelings, attitudes, sentiments, norms, values, meanings, in and out group categorizations and relations), and the *aspect of difference* which was most relevant to reach our research objective. This aspect of difference was used to form the basis of the categories: attitudes towards the sustainability transition. The other aspects that constitute identity were used as a framework to order the cohering narratives that were found within the data. It is based upon the notion that different aspects that constitute a social identity must cohere, as theoretically they are what binds a specific social network or community together via shared narratives and intersubjectivity. The cohering narratives were fitted within one category creating shared discourse and shared identity, by connecting the pieces of narrative into a larger story.

Scientific categorization of the wider population of (Dutch) farmers can be done by using different methods, and different main determinants per category. In this part, a few other approaches that were found in scientific literature will be shortly explained and compared and contrasted with the approach that was used for this thesis. This comparison makes it possible to place results of this research within the broader body of literature which enables us to complement our results with further insights, and it clarifies the added value of this thesis within the broader scientific context.

Diffusion of innovation model Rogers

It is noticeable that among the different key informants, who are agricultural experts and representatives (most of them farmers themselves), the terms *frontrunners*, *middle group* and *laggards* were used when they were asked to describe the landscape of Dutch farmers (As seen in image 4.8). Therein lies a notion of linearity wherein the sector is transitioning from the “old agriculture” towards the “new agriculture”, where this “new agriculture” is more sustainable than the “old agriculture” whatever that

may entail. An entrepreneurial mindset is considered necessary for farmers to be able to make the step from the “old” to the “new” agriculture, although the visions about this “new agriculture” are not entirely unanimous. This linear perspective on the development of the agricultural system coincides with Rogers’ *diffusion of innovations* model (interpreted here as described by Kaminski, 2011), which is a highly influential theory in innovation science. Although in this thesis it was chosen to categorize farmers on the basis of attitudes towards change instead of the “*frontrunner, middle group, laggard* approach”, some of the identity characteristics that supposedly describe the *frontrunners, middle group, and laggards* (according to interviewees) cohere with certain attitudes towards change and their associated narratives and identity traits as were described in this thesis.

If one looks for coherence between Rogers’ model of innovation processes and the categorization approach that was used in this thesis, one could hypothesize that the categories that were found in this thesis are a snapshot of the Dutch farming population, wherein: 1. *innovators* and *early adopters* have already engaged in sustainable agricultural production and cohere with the *pioneering farmers* and some of the *orienting farmers*, 2. the *early majority* is still orienting itself (like the *Orienting farmers*), and 3. the *late majority* and the *laggards* (plus *non-adopters*) are still not opening up to the system innovation of sustainable agricultural production like the *awaiting farmers* and the *resisting farmers* respectively.

Some parallels can be observed when the characteristics of these categories are compared. The *innovators* see themselves as change agents (Kaminski, 2011), which is also found as a characteristic of the *pioneering farmers* identity. Furthermore, the *late majority* is characterized as sensitive to peer pressure, adopting out of necessity rather than motivation, relying strongly on a trusted advisor and easily influenced by *laggards* (Kaminski, 2011). These characteristics cohere well with the characteristics that were attributed to *awaiting farmers* in this research. The embedding of *awaiting farmers* in conventional advisory organs resemble this attitude of the *late majority*. Finally, the characteristics that are attributed to *laggards* in Rogers’ model (*use the past as their point of reference, suspicious of innovations, wanting to maintain the status quo, think innovations are a hindrance to operations* (Kaminski, 2011)) clearly resemble the characteristics that were attributed to *resisting farmers* in this research.

The categorization that was made in this thesis could be considered a historical snapshot that captures the present-day (2019-2021) identity expressions of the different types of adopters as described by Rogers’ Diffusion of innovation model. However, the categories in this thesis focus more on the aspects of embedding within certain social networks and the feelings and motivations that drive the different categories of farmers in their reactions to the sustainability transition (and its associated acceleration points such as the *nitrogen crisis*).

If we accept the above-mentioned hypothesis, Rogers’ characteristics for innovations to successfully diffuse throughout the whole population (observability, relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and complexity (Kaminski, 2011)) don’t favor further diffusion of sustainability in Dutch agriculture. However, if we consider sustainable agricultural production to be an innovation it would be characterized as highly-complex, difficult to observe, diverse in form, and perhaps most importantly, not providing an economic competitive advantage within the current macro-economic system. These things said, if we follow a linear and unidirectional conceptualization of the sustainability transition that is based on classical innovation theory it seems unlikely that this “innovation” will move beyond the current stage of diffusion. Nevertheless, a critical stance towards this hypothesis is also well-founded; it seems rather reductionistic to perceive sustainability in agriculture as an ready-made innovation that just needs to be adopted throughout the farming population, since sustainability is highly context-dependent and perhaps shouldn’t be seen as an innovation, but more as a set of guiding principles and a perspectives that should be used to assess whether certain agricultural practices fit within the carrying capacity

of local- and global ecosystems or not. The farming styles approach by Van der Ploeg (2003) and others, provide a perspective on agricultural development that is less unilinear and unidirectional. The farming styles approach's relevance to understand the results of this thesis, is discussed following in section.

Farming styles research by Van der Ploeg

Van der Ploeg's *farming styles* categorize the landscape of agriculture on the basis of "*different opinions on how farming ought to be organized, and the associated differences in the practice of farming*" (Van der Ploeg, 2012). Farming styles can be described and researched at four interconnected levels: the cultural repertoires, the practices, the socio-technical networks, and the strategic positions with regard to government policy (Van der Ploeg, 2003, 2012). Additionally, farming styles "*represent the material, relational and symbolic outcomes of strategically ordered flows through time*" (Van der Ploeg, 2012). Five outstanding farming styles are described in the context of the Dutch dairy sector, however the farming styles approach can be extrapolated to other sectors. Van der Ploeg (2003) also describes a less outstanding farming style, namely the *ordinary farmers*. This farming style is characterized by not having developed into a specific other farming style, farmers who fit within this style hesitate making choices, steer the path of least resistance and operate a little like one farming style, and then the other. Empirical evidence exists that this style provides lower incomes and unsure future perspectives for farmers as compared to farmers pursuing any of the other "*more outstanding*" styles (Van der Ploeg, 2003).

The categorization of farmers in this thesis is snapshot of farmers' narratives within a specific time period, whereas farming styles describe development pathways, or flows through time. One could hypothesize that certain farming styles, as described by Van der Ploeg and comrades, fit better with present day societal sustainability demands and therefore farmers practicing these styles show less resistance towards the sustainability transition, whereas other farming styles are deeply affected in the core of their practices, resulting in strong resentment and resistance by the farmers. The most important identity aspect that has shaped the different farming styles that emerged since the 1950's (after the Second World War) are the views of, and the belief in certain future scenarios. The "*modernization project*", as Van der Ploeg (2003) calls it, is stooled upon the belief that the future of agriculture will inevitably be technology driven, large scale, highly specialized, world market dependent, synergetic with the food processing industry, and cost-price reduction oriented. This perspective about the future entails that some farmers will make it while others will not (for there is limited land available for bigger farms), and therefore optimization and rationalization of farms is a race that will count winners and losers. According to Van der Ploeg (2003) this vision was manifested by the Ministry of agriculture as they created the fiscal, infrastructural, institutional, and knowledge-system conditions for this future vision to become reality.

By Van der Ploeg (2003), *Large farmers, machinemen, and intensive farmers* are characterized as believers of the abovementioned modernization viewpoint, and motivated by participation in that *race*. These three farming styles are characterized by their strong bonds with and dependence on agribusiness and food industries, banks, cooperatives, and unions, who are all partners in the co-production of modernized agriculture (Van der Ploeg, 2003). Furthermore the farmers who fit within these styles recognize the expert system and the technology suppliers as authorities that pave the path towards modernized agriculture (Van der Ploeg, 2003). Many characteristics of these three farming styles cohere with *resisting farmers* as described in this thesis. The a shift in political views about the direction of agriculture towards the future explains resistance of those groups who were previously incentivized differently (also an argument that was brought up by key informants).

In contrast to the abovementioned, *economical farmers (and cowmen)* have different views on the future and the "future proof" farm. They are not such strong believers of the modernization project,

and value their independence from institutions and firms, globalized markets, globalized technology supply and external capital. These farming styles are economical, and focus on achieving resilience through a low input-cost strategy. They perceive efficiency as the highest input-output ratio that can be achieved through optimization of the on-farm processes with own resources. Discrepancies with the modernized socio-technical regime and its associated infrastructures have led *economical farmers* to develop into new farming styles which have co-existed alongside the modernized socio-technical regime, giving rise to more niche-oriented, multifunctional or diversified farming styles (Van der Ploeg, 2003) which are presently often seen as sustainable ways of farming. Possibly some farmers within *pioneer* category in this thesis can be associated with the *economical farmer* (as described by Van der Ploeg (2003, 2012)). The difference in cultural repertoires and viewpoints about good farming between the farming styles could explain the *gap* that was identified in this research between *pioneers* and other categories of farmers.

Farming styles help to make sense of cohering cultural, social, and practical aspects of farming. Coherently with this thesis, farming styles research is based upon the notion that farmer's decisions and stances are socially constructed, cultural repertoires and socio-technical networks provide farmers with beacons for decision making processes (Van der Ploeg, 2003). It must be noted that in both approaches, one of the most important aspects that characterized the categories are the strength of ties with agri-food business, cooperatives, and interest organizations and the belief in modernization as "the future". Differently though, the approach in this thesis does not focus much on differences between farmers in terms of the practical parameters on their farms but more on the personal aspects that shape the farmers' identities and attitudes towards the sustainability transition today, it focusses more emotions and public expressions that have manifested themselves within public debates, within farmer circles, and in interaction with other groups in society.

Kringlooplandbouw in de praktijk (circular agriculture in practice)

The idea that certain farming styles fit better within the sustainability transition than others (as is hypothesized in the previous section) is worked out by Erisman and Verhoeven (2019). Erisman and Verhoeven (2019) make use of Van der Ploeg's farming styles, combined with additional empirical data, and their own experience in the agricultural sector to categorize farmers on the basis of their position vis-à-vis circular agriculture (as shown in Figure 5.1). Similar to the farming styles approach, Erisman and Verhoeven's categories are mainly stooled upon the farm parameters that farmers within a certain category aim to optimize. Then the perceptions, and relationships in socio-technical networks that

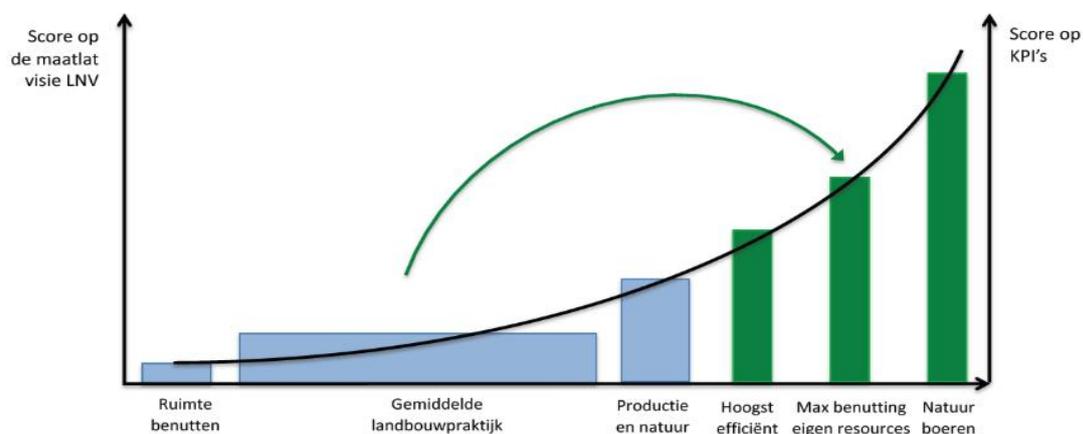


Figure 5.1 Categories as defined by Erisman and Verhoeven (2019) on the basis of circularity scores (as defined by LNV) of different farm types and the transition of average farms to circular farming. In English the categories are space utilization, average farming practices, production and nature, highly efficient, maximal use of own resources and nature farmers from left to right respectively.

come along with such optimization strategies are explored. However, similar to the categorization in this thesis, the present-day stances towards the sustainability (or circularity) transition are also included in Erisman and Verhoeven's (2019) categorization of the Dutch farmer population.

Similar to the categories in this thesis, Erisman and Verhoeven's (2019) categories of Dutch farmers are a snapshot of the present day situation. The objective is to inform policy makers and other stakeholders on the current status of developments towards circular agriculture. The authors provide advice about what is needed for a transition, which they envision as the movement of farmers from the *average farming population* category towards *maximal use of own resources* category, which they call *circular farmers*. Circular farmers are characterized as independent, self-willed, prudent, conscious about all aspects of farm management, and delivering diverse products and services. They have an integral way of working, have a broad perspective and see opportunities. Parallels can be seen between circular farmers and the category of *pioneering farmers* in this thesis. The *average farming practices* category is characterized as reliant on advice from agribusiness, interest organizations and peers. Often they are heavily financed by banks which implies they need to expand to keep up with rising costs, parallels can be seen with *awaiting farmers* in this thesis.

For a transition the authors mention the need for independent advisors and study groups. Erisman and Verhoeven characterize the more circular categories of farmers as independent from the agro-industrial input and sales cooperatives. However, paradoxically, in their recommendations about how to involve the *average farming practices* category in the circular agriculture transition, they include actions from the same stakeholders who are maintaining the farmers in the "old paradigm". They perhaps see a different development pathway for the middle group than for the pioneers themselves (as would be assumed by Roger's diffusion of innovations model), wherein the category of *average farmers* transforms alongside (some of) its alliances, rather than gaining independence from them. Erisman and Verhoeven do not discuss the transition of the *space use-maximalization* category. The *space utilization* category is oriented on maximization of production per hectare with little regard for societal challenges and operate close to the boundaries of environmental regulations (Erisman & Verhoeven, 2019). This suggests that the nitrogen regulations are affecting this group more than other groups. One may expect this results in stronger resistance to the new regulations which suggests that this category coincides with some of the *resisting farmers* as were described in this thesis.

Erisman and Verhoeven's (2019) research focusses mainly on practices, and on the motivations behind them, whereas this thesis is more focused on narratives within the public debate. Although probably closely related, the cultural aspects that motivate certain farming practices (Erisman and Verhoeven, 2019) are different from the narratives that drive collectivity among farmers in public realms (this thesis). It is important to note that the *nitrogen crisis*, which led to strong collective identity formation within the Dutch farming population happened closely prior to the data collection period for this thesis. Therefore, the attitudes towards transition, as portrayed through public expressions at the time were largely colored by this historical event, whereas attitudes towards circular agriculture that are purely based on the cultural repertoires underlying certain farming practices (Erisman and Verhoeven, 2019) may differ substantially. The shock of the *nitrogen crisis*, and the political responses of farming communities to it, strongly laid the emphasis on emotions and sentiments towards societal developments, which are strong forces driving collectivity (as shown in this thesis). It is a relevant suggestion of Erisman and Verhoeven (2019) to focus on the group of *average farming practices* in order to speed up the transition towards circular agriculture. Therefore, the effects of this crisis on the attitudes of the *average agricultural practices* category are highly relevant. It seems plausible that the characterization of the *awaiting farmers* in this thesis helps to get insight on this matter.

Reflections about categorization of farmers in the light of transition

Rogers' diffusion of innovations model and Van der Ploeg's farming styles both provide a way to categorize the population of farmers within a dynamic process. Rogers' categories represent different phases of an innovation process, whereas Van der Ploeg's farming styles represent different development pathways in a parallel process of change. The categorization of the farming population as performed in this thesis represents a static picture of present day collectivities, which is similar to the circular agriculture in practice categorization that was done by Erisman and Verhoeven (2019). However, in comparison with the three other approaches to categorize the Dutch farmer population, this thesis specifically focusses on the different identity characteristics that bring about social- and collective identity formation whereas the identity characteristics that are touched upon in the other approaches are closely related to the farmers' practices and less related to their positioning within the societal debate (although related).

The diffusion of innovation model portrays a unilinear view of innovations spreading through society. This may be useful for very simple innovations such as a specific technology, but for systems innovations like the sustainability transition it probably is too reductionistic. It reduces the sustainability transition to a simple unidirectional processes whereas it may be a more accurate perspective that the sustainability transition consists of many simultaneous innovation pathways. However, one aspect of the sustainability transition in agriculture that can be considered linear is the ideological transition wherein predominant productivist normative frames evolve into environmentally conscious normative frames. If we would apply the diffusion of innovations model to the diffusion of environmentally conscious normative frames, then Roger's criteria for innovations to be successful (observability, relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and complexity (Kaminski, 2011)) don't point in the direction of complete adoption throughout the population. Assumably the transition towards environmentally conscious normative frames conflicts with economical paradigms that are at the basis of classical innovation models.

Van der Ploeg's farming styles illustrate a more multilinear conceptualization of the transition of Dutch agriculture. The idea that sustainable agriculture may be practiced in many different ways and that the sustainability transition in agriculture will occur through multiple development pathways simultaneously, aligns much better with the farming styles approach than with Rogers' diffusion of innovations approach. However, this conceptualization lacks the interaction *between* the different categories as described in the diffusion of innovation's model. The conception that some farming styles are further in the integration of sustainable practices and sustainable normative frames than others, and that those who are further have the potential to inspire and educate other farming categories does make sense within a societal context that demands more sustainability in agriculture. So, the idea that there is some linearity in the sustainability transition makes sense too. Therefore it may be useful to conceptualize the sustainability transition as a unidirectional multilinear process, whereby there is a clear direction (more environmentally conscious farming practices and normative frames) while also recognizing that there are multiple pathways that are leading to that direction. These different development lines are stooled upon different histories, and are induced by different identity traits.

Some aspects of difference that were used in this thesis coincided with aspects of difference that came forward in all the explored categorization approaches. These are: embedding in larger agro-industrial structures versus independence from them, being world-market oriented or not, having entrepreneurial characteristics such as openness to the new, being venturesome and seeing opportunities versus the non-agency of certain groups, the role-identity of change agent that is adopted by some types of farmers, the characteristic of being economically prudent, and the awareness of resource use on the farm and the associated resilience. It may be concluded that these aspects are among the most

relevant to make sense of the differences between farmers in the Netherlands. The aspects of embedding in larger agro-industrial structures and the entrepreneurial characteristic of seeing opportunities also have a central role in Methorst's (2016) three-fold embedding and strategic decision making research.

Like Erisman and Verhoeven (2019) suggest, focusing on the group of *average farmers* to engage in a sustainability transition seems to be the most promising step to forward the present-day sustainability transition in Dutch agriculture. It is interesting that this category, and its associated characteristics, coincides to a large extent with categories that were described in all the explored categorization approaches. *Ordinary farmers* (Van der Ploeg, 2003), the *late majority* (Rogers in Kaminski, 2011) and *awaiting farmers* (this thesis) are all characterized by the ease with which they are influenced by others, their dependence on trusted advisors, their non-agency and lack of entrepreneurial attitudes, their wait-and-see attitude, and importantly within the present circumstances, their suboptimal income generation. *Cooperative thinking*, as described earlier in this thesis, is presumably founded upon a history wherein institutions and firms have intentionally stirred the farming population to *follow* the modernization path leaving behind many of their own development trajectories (see section 5.1). This raises the question whether this 'non-agency' is inherent to this category, or whether this is what farmers were forced into. Within the present-day agricultural transition, it is important to be conscious of the way in which we wish to include this category of farmers. It is needed to increase our knowledge and understanding about their history, about the way this category relates to the other categories and about their cognitions, feelings and motivations. Within scientific research it is easier to identify and characterize the outstanding groups in a population, but the ones who are harder to identify may be the ones who are the more important to understand.

The value of this research lies in the identification of those identity aspects that are bringing farmers together in their present day situation. The present day situation is largely colored by the *nitrogen crisis*, to a large extent, and to a lesser extent by the "new" direction that is provided by the ministry of agriculture (LNV) towards circular agriculture, alongside with the societal tensions around the environmental crisis and animal welfare concerns. Public narratives that provide the basis for collectivity and intersubjectivity are largely stooled on emotions and sentiments, alongside with the different stories and cognitions about the present day dominant topics of societal discussions. These present-day emotions and stories are related with the underlying and lasting values, cultural repertoires and socio-cultural embedding of farmers. However, it is clear that historical events and contemporary topics can influence the extent to which farmers with a particular cultural background identify with one another. Positionality towards certain topics can unify and separate communities through the process of social- and collective identity formation.

The following hypothesis is brought forward: attitudes towards sustainability in farming practices were strongly influenced by the threat that the *nitrogen crisis* posed for the entire agricultural sector, strong emotional reactions have driven collectivity among communities and networks that, prior to the crisis, were less associated to one another because of differing cultural repertoires.

5.4 REFLECTION ON METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The content and narrative analysis of online and offline sources in combination with the interviewing of experts yielded a rich set of empirical data which successfully contributed to increase the researcher's understanding of Dutch farmer's identities and their attitudes towards the sustainability transition. The strength of the detailed line-by-line coding which was prescribed by the grounded theory approach is that the topics that were identified as relevant to farmers were identified (insofar possible) separate from much pre-assumptions of the researcher. Although this method created the

possibility to let the theoretical outcomes emerge from the dataset itself rather than from pre-assumed knowledge and theories, this extensive way of analyzing data sources was rather time-consuming and therefore the amount of sources that were consulted, and the range of different sources that informed this research were rather limited. Therefore, it remains unclear to what extent the results that were found are representative for the farmer population in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the attempt to include the whole range of topics that are relevant to farmers, and to avoid arbitrary selection of specific focus points by the researcher yielded a long list of topics. The value of this thesis therefore lies in the identification of relevant topics for farmers on the basis of empirical data, and less in profound inquiry of one or a few relevant topics.

Some narratives were clearly identifiable as dominant narratives, due to a lot of repetition of those narratives in the data. Nuances within those dominant narratives were identified when zooming in further into some of those topics. For other narratives little data was found with the methods of data collection for this thesis, therefore it remains unclear what the prevalence and nuances of those narratives are within other social spheres that lay outside the scope of this research. One of the main data sources in this research were Facebook groups, this makes these results biased towards the narratives of farmers and farming networks who are active on this social media platform. The knowledge of the key informants about farmer narratives helped to compensate for this bias, but the amount of interviewees and the diversity of interviewees was not high enough for this research to make sure it covers the whole spectrum of farmers. Throughout the interviewing process key informants shared their insights about the farming population in the Netherlands, which strongly shaped the ideal types that were created in this thesis. It is important to note that despite the interviewees being experts who have a broad understanding of the agricultural sector, this data remains strongly opinionated and reflects the personal viewpoints of the informants. The data that was obtained from the interviews largely informed the results and conclusions in this research.

The extensive amount of quotes and other content is presented in the result with the objective of showing the reader the nuances within certain topics, but also to show the tone and emotional load that accompanies the narratives that were found within social networks of farmers. This aspect is considered relevant to achieve the research aim which is to increase the reader's understanding about farmer's identities. It must be noted that the selection and translation of the quotes by the researcher, as well as the synthesis of data into ideal-typical categories of farmers is an interpretative process. Despite the attempt to reduce the researcher's bias through line-by-line coding, (qualitative) social sciences are inherently a product of the researcher's interpretation of reality and thus will always remain subjective.

Unique to this research is the method that was used for categorization of the ideal type farmers. The elements that constitute the concept of identity from a symbolic interactionist perspective (operationalized on the basis of various sources by the researcher) serves as a useful framework to bring together different identity traits that cohere among social categories of farmers. Aspects like emotions, are linked to specific cognitions and understandings of reality, which in turn are linked to the perception of alliances and adversaries within a specific social category. Therefore this categorization method that is stooled upon the concept of identity not only serves to understand the shared cognitions of present day and past events (which is the tip of the iceberg), but it also unveils all the identity characteristics that are associated with that story. Thereby enlarging our understanding about the processes that have led to the construction of certain stories, and the underlying psychological, cultural, and social elements. The identity-based framework to describe social categories of farmers made it possible to point out the coherence within an extensive empirical dataset wherein an attempt was made to grasp the less factual aspects of identity (such as emotions, sentiments, attitudes and so on) alongside with

the narratives and cognitions that dominate social networks of farmers. The relative size of social categories of farmers remains unclear, however the insight into the qualitative aspects of the farming population can provide a good starting point for more quantitative research.

The research method and design were informed by the theoretical lens of social constructivism and the methods were informed by the constructivist grounded theory approach as described by Charmaz (2006), which is also rooted in the social constructivist school of thought. The notion that the self is a social structure, and that our identities are fully shaped by our embedding in social contexts is just one among diverse understandings of identity and the self. Certain aspects of one's identity may as well be related to other factors, for instance genes, age, embedding in other aspects that are not social (such as environmental), and more. The process by which ideal typical categories in this thesis were created, namely by finding the coherence in narratives that derive from certain types of social networks may be reductionistic if the possibility is included that some identity traits are more personal rather than social.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis contributes to deepen the reader's understanding about how the process of identification influences Dutch farmers' collective attitudes towards the sustainability transition by 1. exploring which social contexts influence their identities and how, 2. studying the narratives that reveal what drives collectivity within farming communities and 3. by abstracting four ideal typical social categories of Dutch farmers which are connected to one another through shared meanings and intersubjectivity around the topic of the sustainability transition in farming. Unique to this research is the method that was used for categorization of the ideal type farmers on the basis of the elements that constitute the concept of identity from a symbolic interactionist perspective. The identity-based framework made it possible to point out the coherence within an extensive empirical dataset wherein an attempt was made to grasp the less factual aspects of identity (such as emotions, sentiments, attitudes and so on) alongside with the narratives and cognitions that dominate social networks of farmers.

Farmers in the Netherlands are connected to one another through various groups and social networks, ranging from formal to informal, and from local to national. There are many forms of interaction, and facilitating structures that shape the social contexts of farmers in the Netherlands. Most farmers in the Netherlands are members with some kind of group, be it an association, cooperative, or interest organization. At the same time, in daily life farmers are part of their local networks and families, both connecting with farmers and non-farmers. Communication platforms, agricultural professional media and social media also have a networking function in community formation within the agricultural sector as they spread and connect farmer's ideas and narratives. Social media is playing an increasingly important role in connecting farmers today and is especially popular among young farmers.

The Dutch agricultural sector is characterized by strong embedding in family structures and associated values and practices. Furthermore, Dutch farming communities were found to have a strong embedding in larger structures like agri-food firms and cooperatives, and that of interest organizations that stir the direction of the agricultural system. This embedding is strengthened by the participation of larger structures in personal spheres of farmers, and thereby increasing the salience of the associated identity characteristics. This strong influence of agri-food firms and cooperatives, and that of interest organizations is rooted in a historical context wherein farmers have internalized their role as *producers*. The salience of these identity characteristics is increased through tradition, for the more intimate social networks of farmers have adopted these identity traits as their own.

Social media networks of farmers are dominated by narratives that portray farmers as victims of framing by perversely motivated environmentally-oriented antagonists of the agricultural sector, alongside with farming promotion campaigns as an attempt to un-frame or re-frame farmers. Although unclear to which extent, these groups are likely overrepresented on social media platforms such as Facebook and thereby possibly also overrepresented in societal debates in general. The digital age influences identity formation among (especially young) farmers, facilitating the formation of collective identities that engage in direct political action. It is hypothesized that, like elsewhere in society, social media has strengthened more extreme collective farmer identities and increased polarization within the landscape of farming communities.

Analysis of shared narratives showed that diverse social categories of farmers address the need for better incomes but differ in the strategies that are proposed to get there. Some strategies fit better within the present day world-market dependent agro-industrial regime than others. Standpoints and attitudes towards environmental issues and nature among Dutch farmers differ much from topic to topic. Disputation of facts and figures dominate societal discussions about environmental problems

related to agriculture in the Netherlands. It is hypothesized that the *nitrogen crisis* has increased the salience of resistance, anti-environmental, and anti-governmental social identities amongst farmer communities, giving rise to collective identities that engage in direct political action.

The landscape of Dutch farmers was subdivided into four ideal typical categories. Attitudes towards the sustainability transition, associated narratives, and other identity traits that drive intersubjectivity were used to typify these four social categories of farmers. Coherence was found among cognitions, emotions, values, meanings, and perceptions of in and out groups that shape the social identities of the four categories: *Resisting farmers*, *Awaiting farmers*, *Orienting farmers*, and *Pioneering farmers*.

To make sense of how the different attitudes towards the sustainability transition have emerged, it is useful to look at different farming styles and associated identity characteristics which are stooled upon different historical development pathways in Dutch agriculture. The *nitrogen crisis* can be understood as a historical turning point where some farm optimisation strategies that form the core of certain farming styles are no longer viable, and some development pathways enable farmers to be better equipped to deal with the changes than others. This explains the rise of a *resisting attitude* towards change among some categories of farmers more strongly than among others.

Parallels between this thesis and other farmer categorization approaches in literature reveal which aspects are the most relevant to make sense of the differences between farmers in the Netherlands: embedding in larger agro-industrial structures versus independence from them, being world-market oriented or not, the role-identity of change agent that is adopted by some types of farmers and not by others, the characteristic of being economically prudent, the awareness of resource use on the farm and the associated resilience, and very importantly, having entrepreneurial characteristics such as openness the new, being venturesome and seeing opportunities versus the non-agency of certain groups which is often associated with a rigid role-identity revolving around being a producer and nothing more.

In this thesis the category of farmers embodying the trait of non-agency was labelled *awaiting farmer* and shows strong parallels with categories in other research. Narratives that were found in this research signal that this category is frustrated because of their bad incomes and poor future prospects, alongside with little control over their fate in the context of present day crises and changing societal demands. The reaction of this category which has been observed in this research, is to unite and associate oneself with groups who express their feelings of dissatisfaction very explicitly, the *resisting farmers* (and allies). Politically however, it is a relevant question how this *awaiting* category of farmers should be approached, for this category could also be considered to have an important role in a transition of the agricultural landscape. Perhaps it is not realistic to expect this category of *awaiting farmers* to suddenly become more "entrepreneurial" like *pioneering farmers*, and certainly not in the short time frame in which the sustainability transition will have to take place. They are left dangling in uncertainty between two paradigms and don't know what to do. If as a society we choose to discourage certain development paths by means of nitrogen reducing measures, the question is what we want to do with the middle groups of farmers. Do we leave them to their fate? Is it survival of the fittest? Are we going to let those who are not assertive enough to adapt to the new standards disappear, including their lineages? Or are we going to provide them with clear beacons and funds to make a shift towards circular agriculture? Increasing societal understanding of the motivations and driving factors that move this category of farmers seems rather relevant for a transition towards a more sustainable agricultural system.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1. ASPECTS OF DIFFERENCE

Characteristics that differentiate farmer identities

During the interviews that were held with key informants these different aspects in which communities of farmers differ from one another had special attention. With open questions like “what do you think are the biggest differences between farmers?”, “how would you categorize different kinds of farmers?”, or “do you see significant divisions within the landscape of Dutch farmers?” the ‘aspects of difference’ were researched. This yielded a list of characteristics in which farmers differ from one another, where some of these characteristics were mentioned more regularly than others.

Attitudes and feelings:

- To be done with it! vs. to be ambitious and wanting to get to work (Voncken, 2020)
- resisting change vs. open towards change
- Angry vs. relativistic
- a little underappreciated vs. extremely underappreciated
- open for more transparency vs. reluctant for more transparency.
- frustration about change in direction of policies vs. collaborative with new direction of ministry

Values

- Traditional/conservative vs. innovative
- Focus on action and resistance! Vs. focus on connection with society
- Interested in destination of produce vs. not interested in destination of product vs. world market farmer
- Salience: Most important contribution of farmers: food for people, high quality produce, economy, preserving landscapes, low environmental impact while producing
- Salience: value of farming lifestyle: animals, caretaking, family knowledge and traditions, nature and outside work, hard work, machinery tractors, freedoms of living in the countryside.
-

Cognitions & standpoints

- Problem: farmers are being framed vs. problem: farmers have to listen better to societal wishes
- Better income within the context of world market vs. better income through abandoning focus on world market
- Fair income (for sustainable production): higher margins from supermarkets OR level playing field OR level playing field OR protection of national markets OR short value chain and payments for environmental services.

- environment as threat to existence vs environment = responsibility
- focus in green vs grey focus on unfairness vs. farmers are a significant part of the problem
- mainstream agriculture is a treat for nature vs. mainstream agriculture preserves nature (has a better understanding of nature than the rest of society)
- disbelief in numbers and models (Belief in perverse incentives) vs. agreement that scientific numbers about the environment are alarming
- different views on the severity of the nitrogen crisis 1. It doesn't exist, 2. Its not as bad as they make it seem, 3. Don't know. 4. Farmers have to take responsibility for the nitrogen problems.
- Overregulation hampers farmers (both farmers who want to change and who want to do business as usual) vs. regulations are needed

Embedding and relations

- *“Cooperative thinker” agri-food embedded vs. independent/entrepreneurial*
- Environmentalists vs. anti-environmentalists
- Collaborative with government vs anti-gouvernement
- Open for increased connections with consumers vs. not open for increased connections with consumers

Self-perception:

- Producer vs. entrepreneur
- Environment is not our problem/nonexistent problem vs. we are part of the problems
- Environmentalism is opposed to farming vs. farmers as environmentalists
-

Practices

- Diversified vs. specialized

Information sources:

- Social media vs. professional media
- Almost all magazines (hungry for information) vs. no interest in magazines (Interviewee M, 2021; Voncken, 2020)

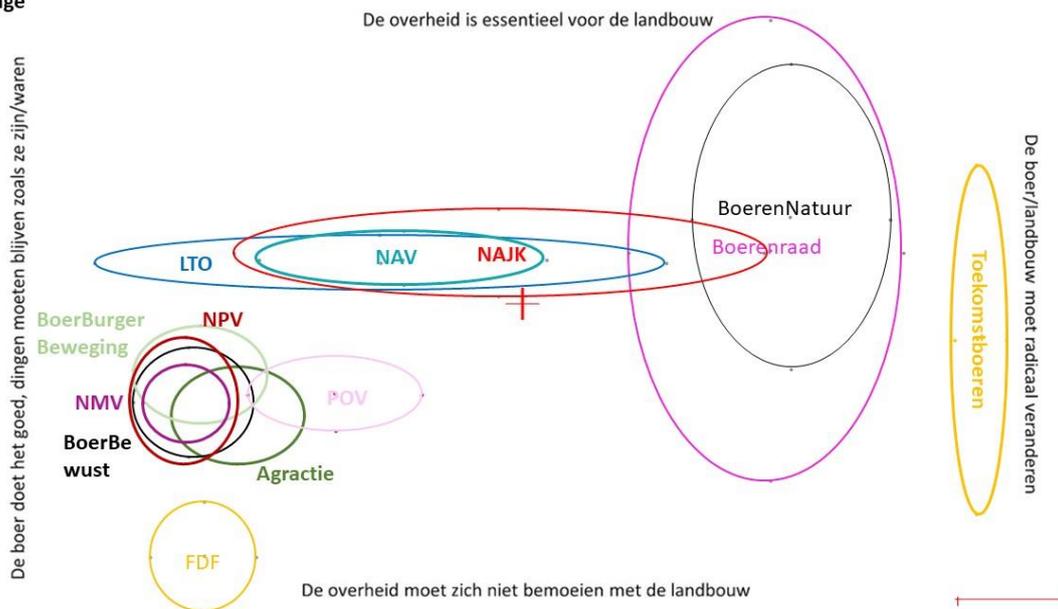
Demographics:

- teenager – young adult – adult – of age
- student/aspirant farmers & farmworkers -starting farmers – experienced farmers
- regional differences

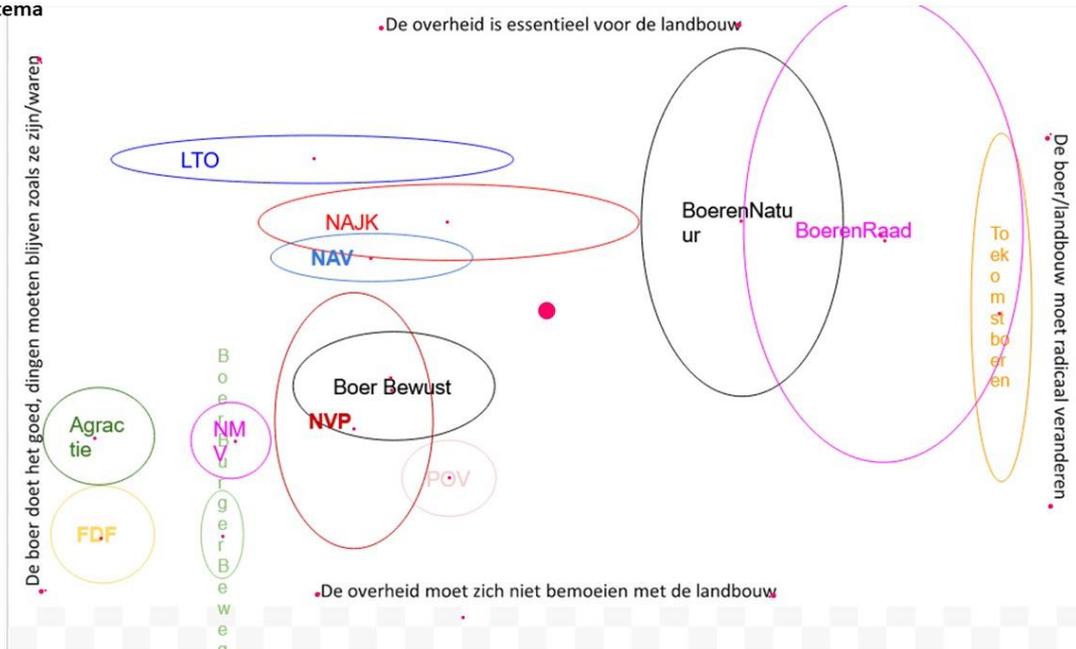
APPENDIX 2. POSITIONALITY OF INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS

To create the social categories of farmers on the basis of attitudes towards the sustainability transition, it was necessary to get an understanding of the positionality of the different organizations by which farmers feel represented and that are actively spreading narratives in public realms. After the identification of important organizations that are involved in political representation of farmers, some agricultural experts were asked to help position these organizations in a two dimensional field that helped the researcher to understand their positionality vis-a-vis change and government interventions in agriculture. This was done in Google Drawings, where respondents could edit the positions of the different organizations that were placed in the two-dimensional field by the researcher. Four respondents helped position the organizations on the field, one of which was a new informant, namely a representative of the arable farming labor union. The positionality maps of the four respondents were averaged into one positionality map that shows a general picture of the positionality of interest organizations. Alongside with the positionality maps, emails were exchanged with the respondents to discuss their reasoning.

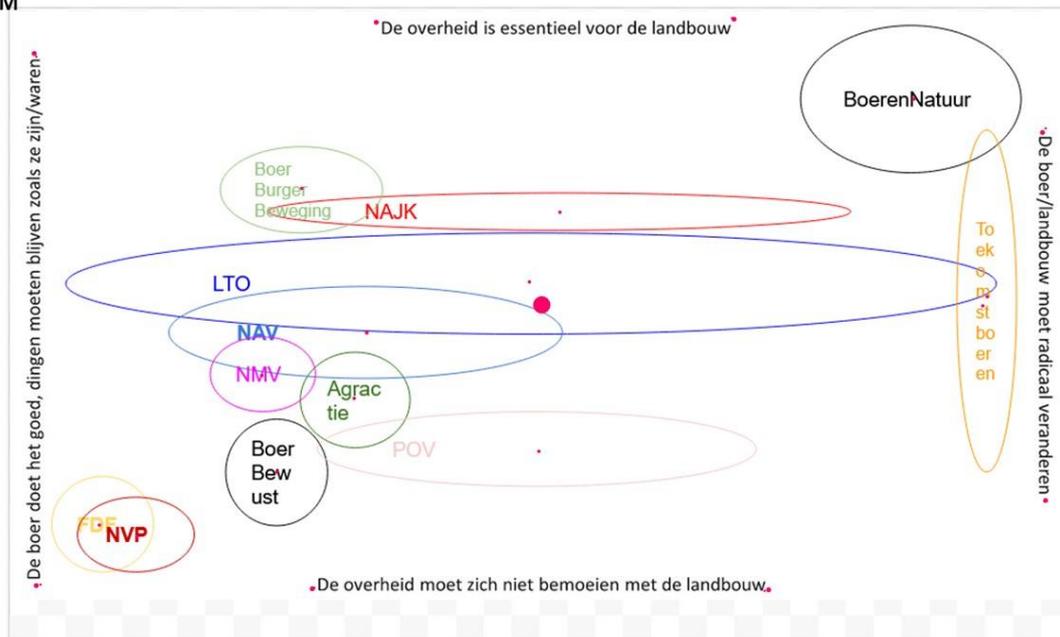
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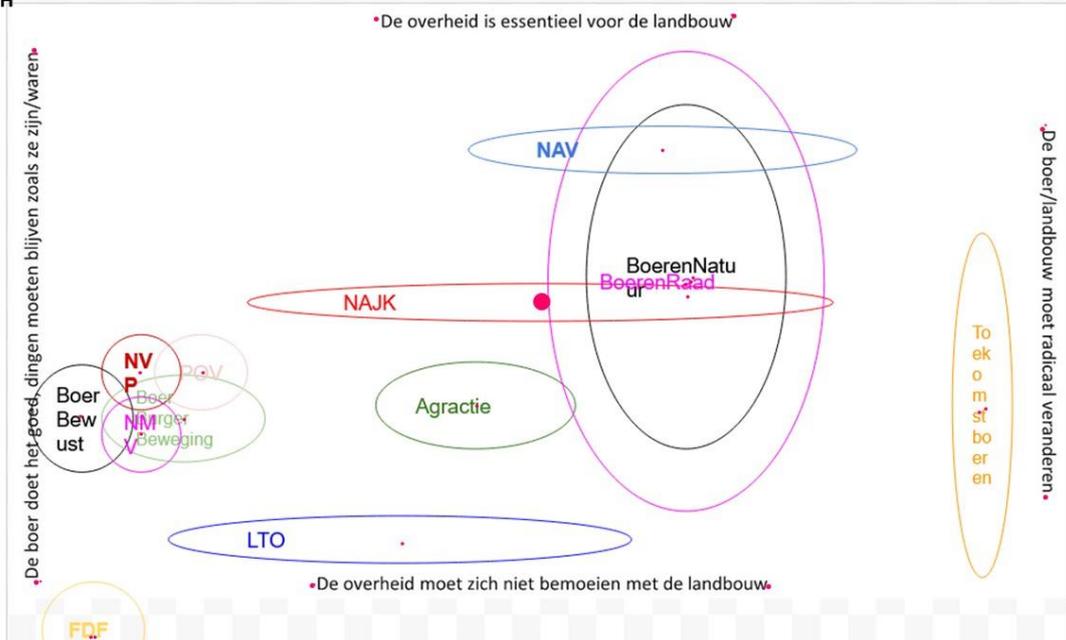
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TvdM



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WV

