Finding ‘Hobby’ Farmers: A ‘Parish Study’ Methodology for Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This paper presents a methodology for undertaking research with a ‘difficult to reach population’ – hobby farmers. In an investigation designed to assess agrarian transition processes in a peri-urban locale, data was sought on every agricultural holding in a Scottish parish (municipality). This ‘parish study’ methodology combined participant mapping and qualitative interviewing with photo elicitation. Participant mapping was found to be useful for identifying farmers who are not normally included in rural social research, leading to a high response rate and a respondent pool for photo elicitation. The method also enabled the analysis of agrarian identity and land use. However, the parish study method is not suited to studies of dispersed groups and is more resource intensive than standard qualitative interview-based studies. A number of ethical and EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) issues also arise around identifying participants, mapping, photos and incentivising participation in the research. The utility of the parish study method is demonstrated through two key findings of the research: the problematic definition of ‘hobby farmers’ in the study site and the trajectories towards de facto land abandonment in a peri-urban locale.

Introduction

In this article I present a methodology for studying a difficult to reach population – ‘hobby farmers’: agricultural land managers who manage their holdings primarily for amenity purposes. The definition thus includes ‘lifestyle’ and ‘non-commercial’ farmers (i.e., agricultural land managers who are not primarily profit driven). Gaining access to hobby farmers is challenging because there is no definitive list (Holloway, 2001). As Burton and Wilson (1999) argue, ‘lifestyle’ farmers are either intentionally or unintentionally omitted from quantitative surveys. Wilson himself for example, deliberately excluded ‘hobby or part-time farms with less than 15 ha’ from his research (1997, p. 76), because they were unlikely...
to be eligible for participation in the agri-environmental scheme under study. Abrams and Bliss (2013) similarly excluded holdings under 40 acres (16 ha) from their American study, because those ‘properties were too small to effectively manage for agricultural or forestry objectives’ (p. 850), although the focus of their research was on amenity land ownership. These small-scale holdings are thus under-researched but are the locations of important changes to agricultural land management: part of complex, ongoing transition processes in rural areas, where production, consumption and protection approaches to land management overlap and conflict (see Murdoch et al., 2003; Wilson, 2008; Holmes, 2012). In Scotland (where the case-study is based) recent research suggests that over 13 per cent of Scotland’s agricultural land is managed by non-commercial land managers (Sutherland et al., 2019).

Hobby or non-commercial farmers are typically identified while contacting farmers as part of a larger study. For example, Pike (2008) identified a small cohort of ‘life choice’ farmers in their UK farming typology; Bohnet (2008) similarly identified both ‘lifestyle’ and ‘hobby farmers’ within their Australian farming typology. In the USA, Abrams and Bliss (2013) utilised a tax lot database to identify landowners, which were subsequently categorised as ‘amenity’ or ‘production’-oriented. In this article I similarly identify ‘hobby’ farmers from a larger group of farmers. However, whereas in these studies the label of ‘hobby’, ‘small-holder’ or ‘back to the lander’ are ascribed by the researcher, here I assess how the landholders themselves self-identify. I utilise this analysis to demonstrate the utility of the parish study method for understanding processes of identity formation and contestation, and how these are enacted at local level.

In this article I argue that standard methods utilised to understand hobby farming can omit a subset of this population. Targeted studies of amenity-oriented farmers tend to draw on voluntary affiliations. For example, Holloway’s (2001, 2002) UK studies of small-holders were based on subscribers to ‘Smallholding Magazine’, who volunteered to participate on the basis of an advert in the magazine. Wilbur (2014a, 2014b) selected his Italian sample of ‘back-to-the-landers’ from membership lists of WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and APE (Association for the Experience of Self-reliance and Co-operation in Farming, Society and Culture). Resultant research on non-commercial and lifestyle-based approaches to farming tends to portray small-holders and hobby farmers as active and productive: actively engaged in managing their land and producing environmental public goods. I argue that utilising sampling frames of farmers above a certain size, or voluntary adherents to an organisation is likely to overemphasise the activity levels of recreational land holders. There is substantive evidence that hobby farmers could be highly inactive: recent literature has raised the question of de facto land abandonment in both peri-urban and remote regions where recreational approaches to land management are becoming more common (Hatna and Bakker, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2014). Norwegian research suggests that a substantial proportion of potential smallholding purchasers primarily seek rural residences (Blekesaune et al., 2010). The characterisation of hobby farmers as active land managers thus does not address the entire picture.

In this article, I present and assess the utility of a ‘parish study’ methodology for rural research: a qualitative research method combining participant mapping
with qualitative interviews and photo elicitation, targeting the whole population of land managers within a defined geographical region. I support my arguments with empirical research findings. The analysis in this article is organised in two parts: first, I evaluate the parish study approach as a research method; second, I demonstrate the added value of the parish study method to better understand the range of hobby farmers and their practices. The latter is achieved through development of two emergent findings which would have been more difficult to identify through a traditional research method: the problematic identity of hobby farmers and de facto land abandonment in a peri-urban locale. I conclude with methodological reflections and implications for future research.

Conceptual Foundations of the parish study method

The parish study methodology represents a progression of a rich rural sociological tradition of community-based research (see Liepins, 2000). ‘Community studies are typically carried out by researchers living in a settlement in order to investigate local social networks in the residential area, normally through qualitative methods that treat residents as comprising a cohesive social unit’ (Payne and Payne, p. 47). Crow (2002) traces the history of community studies in the UK. He argues that ‘traditional’ community studies of the 1950s emphasised description of everyday activities, largely guided by implicit structural-functionalist assumptions. Research was highly labour intensive, oriented towards inductive examination of the complex interactions associated with the reproduction of community life. This type of research became less popular in the 1970s, in favour of less empirical but more theoretical work, with notable exceptions, such as Howard Newby’s (1979; Newby et al. 1978) seminal work on social power structures in rural England. Community-based research regained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, more actively engaging with sociological theory. The particular value of community-based approaches is in the empirical testing of social theories, and the opportunity for new sociological concepts to emerge.

The parish study presented here continues the community studies tradition. It is grounded in a defined geographical space – the land holdings within or bordering on Strathben Parish – and is labour intensive. However, the ‘community’ is not the focus of the research: although all participants affiliate with Strathben, their ‘communities of place’ were smaller-scale, with limited connection between the northern and southern residents of the parish. Community studies are also typically ethnographic (Crow, 2008); this present study is based entirely on qualitative interviews. However, as a locale-based approach, it could be utilised to assess community interactions (e.g., social networks and structures).

The parish study method also utilises a mapping process. Burton (2004), Wilson (1997), Gill et al. (2010) and Errington (1995) similarly used maps to support their data collection in their community-based studies. For example, Burton’s (2004) seminal paper on ‘good farming’ involved asking study participants to identify their holding and those of their neighbours on a map. He later carried out qualitative interviews with 60 of the 77 farmers in Marston Vale, UK. Through this dataset, Burton was able to identify the role of social norms in farmer’s identities, and how these
were reinforced by neighbours through routine interactions. Wilson (1997) similarly utilised a mapping approach, reaching 175 of 176 eligible Welsh farms with questionnaires; he identified a range of factors influencing agro-environmental scheme uptake on small-scale farms. Burton (2004) and Wilson (1997) brought their studies together to demonstrate the utility of this map-based sampling approach in Burton and Wilson (1999). Their paper focused on challenging the validity of the Yellow Pages (telephone directory) as a sampling frame; they contrasted the characteristics of their participants with those of the farmers identified in the Yellow Pages. They found that the Yellow Pages significantly under-represented ‘lifestyle’ farmers, who were less commercially minded but more environmentally oriented.

The participant mapping approach was undertaken in Burton (2004) and Wilson’s (1997) cases because comprehensive coverage was necessary (i.e., the initial purpose of their studies was statistical analysis, Burton and Wilson, 1999). Burton and Wilson’s (1999) case studies sought to identify registered farmers: farmers who would also appear in the agricultural census, and who were eligible for scheme participation. The participant mapping approach utilised in this present research was undertaken in order ensure the inclusion of a range of land managers (particularly hobby farmers) who may have been excluded from the census; it was undertaken specifically to generate qualitative data.

The parish study approach also involves photo elicitation. Enrolling study participants in taking photos requires more active effort on the part of the participant but yields an interview in which it is easier to build rapport between interviewer and interviewee (Richard and Lahman, 2015). Photo elicitation also elicits extended personal narratives of experiences (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004) and is helpful for eliciting data on embodied experiences of particular locales (Matteucci, 2013). Although photo-based research methods are well established, they remain unusual within the rural sociology literature.

Application in Strathben parish

Strathben parish (Scottish term for township) was deliberately selected as a region where there was likely to be a number of non-commercial farmers (see Pinto Correia et al., 2015): it is within commuting distance to a wealthy city, it has a visually attractive landscape (a nearby mountain with hiking trails) and is characterised by a landholding pattern which includes a large number of small-scale agricultural holdings. Study participants included a range of full and part-time farmers, as well as a number of rural residents who kept horses and small amounts of livestock. Study participation was limited to land holders of 2 hectares (ha) or over, in order to focus the research on holdings which could reasonably be expected to have been utilised for agricultural production in the past.

In order to assemble the dataset, I began with the recommendations of a key informant (a local agricultural consultant) and Yell.com (telephone directory), contacting every farmer listed, interviewing them in person, and asking them to identify neighbours. Use of Yell.com confirmed Burton and Wilson’s (1999) finding about the representativeness of resultant holdings: only commercial farms were identified. In addition, several of the holdings were outside of the parish boundaries.
Telephone numbers and rural addresses in the UK reflect proximity to town and village centres, rather than parish boundaries; many farms listed as ‘Strathben’ in the telephone directory were physically located in neighbouring parishes. Use of the telephone directory was thus particularly unhelpful for this parish-based approach. Instead, participants were identified through a form of snowball or chain sampling (see Lavrakas, 2008), which eventually yielded a census of the parish. The final dataset comprised representatives of approximately 90 per cent of the land in the region.

The identification of study participants is thus similar to Burton (2004) and Wilson’s (1997) approaches in terms of population identification, but differed in an important respect: their maps appear to have been solely utilised to identify study participants. In this present research, I utilised these maps as a starting point for the interview: asking how and when the land had been acquired, and identifying and discussing their relationships with the owners or occupiers of neighbouring properties. Study participants were presented with a 1:25 000 scale, which showed the location of all roads and houses, forest and field boundaries, bodies of water and parish boundaries (see Figure 1).

As an incentive for participation, participants were offered a copy of the completed version of the map, including the names of the land holders (both owners and current occupiers e.g., tenants). Two versions of the map were produced: a ‘public version’, with holdings, their owners and occupiers identified (Figure 1), which was returned to participants; and a more comprehensive, anonymised version for use in research (Figure 2). All study participants also received a non-academic report on study findings, illustrated with photos from the photo-elicitation study. This report included anonymised direct quotes, and photos with the affiliation identified as agreed with the photographer (i.e., as copyright holders, some participants asked to be named with their photos).

During the initial semi-structured interviews, participants were engaged in discussion about how they acquired and utilised their land, farm history, farming identity, off-farm employment, participation in social networks and environmental engagement. At the end of the interview, they were also invited to participate in a photo elicitation process. Study participants were asked to take photos of three subjects:

1. important changes you’ve made to your property (e.g. house, buildings)
2. important changes you’ve made to how you manage your land (including livestock, horses)
3. things you like best about living where you live

Participants were provided with disposable cameras and pre-paid envelopes to return the cameras when completed (within the next six months). Although about ¾ of participants agreed to participate, only 19 (less than half) followed through. At the second interview, participants were given a copy of their photos, and invited to discuss them in relation to each of the three topics, elaborating on the change processes involved and telling stories about events or activities involving the image content. The images themselves were thus not analysed.
Figure 1: Public version of Strathben Parish Map [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
Figure 2: Research map of Strathben Parish: Holdings by Land Tenure [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
This data collection process with local residents was supplemented by five key informant interviews: representatives of banking, real estate, agricultural advisors, local history and small-scale farming in the region. In total, 56 land holders were interviewed, including 37 men and 19 women; interviews were conducted with the land holders individually, or in 13 cases as couples. All 12 commercial-scale farmers in the parish (defined as holdings over 50 ha) were interviewed, as well as representatives of 31 other holdings. Second interviews were conducted in 19 cases, utilising photo elicitation. Interviews were transcribed in full and entered into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Data was coded thematically according to the original research questions; interviews were then re-analysed chronologically (in the order in which they acquired their land) to evaluate change over time.

Respondents’ ranged in age from 31 to 82. Holdings ranged from 2 to 3000 hectares in size. Most of the respondents within the parish boundaries were owner-occupiers (see Figure 2), but there was substantive contract farming to the west and three held tenanted land. Farms typically produced beef and or sheep; ten holdings had horses. As will be addressed in the Findings section, seven of the study participants were not actively utilising their agricultural land. The parish method was thus effective in eliciting responses from a wide range of agricultural land managers, ranging from commercially-oriented full and part-time farmers, to small-scale horsiculturalists, smallholdings and rural residents with large gardens. The characteristics of the holdings identified are broadly consistent with Sutherland et al.’s (2014) analysis of small-scale holdings in Scotland, where we found substantial increases in the number of sheep and horses, but decreases in poultry in the county in which the parish is located. Quetier and Gordon (2003) similarly identified the growing number of horses in the Scottish county in which Strathben is located.

Evaluating the research method

In this section, I address four criteria for evaluating qualitative research methods, based on Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 34; Miles et al. (2013, p. 37):

1. Potential to generate rich data on the type of phenomena studied
2. Contribution to the ‘generalisability’ of the findings
3. Research ethics
4. Feasibility of the research

Potential to generate rich data

In the SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods, Given (2008, p. 794) defines ‘rich data’ as: ‘the notion that qualitative data and their subsequent representation in text should reveal the complexities and the richness of what is being studied’. This term can relate to a variety of data forms. To produce rich data through qualitative interviewing, Denzin (1989) described the importance of generating ‘thick description’:
deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences... A thick description... presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description involves emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question.

(Denzin, 1989, p. 83)

No research methods necessarily yield rich data or thick descriptions. The question here is whether the parish method developed has the potential to generate rich data. Denzin’s quotation above provides a number of criteria for evaluating this potential. In this study, the potential for detail, context and history to be described is facilitated by the use of local mapping. Study participants routinely described the history of their land holding acquisition while drawing the boundaries of their holdings (e.g., discussing which parcels were acquired when, and by what means). Use of the map also encouraged discussion of the types of land holding (tenanted or owned) in the parish, and elicited comments about the geophysical characteristics of the region – where land was of (relatively) good or poor quality, and resultant land uses. This information in turn elicited discussion of the changing size of commercial farms in the region, and the introduction of newcomers. Significant events and experiences were elicited through the mapping process (e.g., the time and circumstances of acquisition of the holding), as part of the timeline constructed through the interview, and through the photo elicitation process.

The opportunity for rich data collection is a key benefit of photo elicitation studies (Meo, 2010). Although the photos were taken during the study, by asking the participants to identify changes, the photos yielded rich data on the actions and events which had taken place in the past, and were now linked to specific locations on the farm (e.g., ‘the bridal steps’, installed for a daughter’s wedding in the front field; ‘Jonathan’s field’, named after the birth of a grandchild). Several participants also took the opportunity to show and discuss older photos (e.g. to compare past and present configurations of buildings, size of trees) as part of the interview process. Reflecting on these events and experiences created opportunities for emotions, feelings and actions to be expressed, linking these to the changes made to the land holding.

Consistent with Meo (2010), the photo elicitation interviews were also longer than the initial interview, a finding she attributes to the utility of pictures in helping to engage participants in discussion and overcome fatigue. However, the time-consuming nature of this methodology may also limit the potential for rich data collection: if insufficient time is allowed for data collection, later interviews may become rushed in order to complete the map. The commitment required by study participants to take and submit photos is also an issue – as less than half of study participants completed the photo elicitation component, the added value of this approach for rich data production was also limited, and could lead to generalisation issues.

Generalisability

The research methods literature commonly identifies two primary types of generalisability: probabilistic/statistical and analytical/theoretical (e.g., Mason, 2002; Yin, 2014). Statistical generalisation assesses the likelihood of the sample being
representative – and thus generalisable – to the population (Yin, 2014, p. 40). This approach is typical in quantitative research, but is less common in qualitative research (Mason, 2002; Miles et al., 2013). In the parish study method, probabilistic generalisability is straightforward to demonstrate, as reaching the entire population of the parish is the aim of the sampling strategy. However, study site selection becomes critically important. As described in the Application in Strathben Parish section, the parish was selected because it was likely to be have a number of hobby farms. These characteristics make it likely that findings will be generalisable to other peri-urban horticulture-based locales. However, not all residents can be expected to agree to participate. The sample achieved includes all of the land holders over 50 hectares in size, but there were at least 84 smaller-scale land holders who opted not to participate. As such, although the map covers approximately 90 per cent of the land in the parish, it represents no more than 84 per cent of possible holdings. This remains a very high response rate.

An early observation in data analysis was the difference between the holdings identified and those identified through other methods. The agricultural census identified some 66 holdings in Strathben Parish in 2013, substantially more than the 51 identified in the study. However, only 33 of these holdings receive census forms (i.e., the remainder to not have land or have land solely located outside of the parish). In the UK, census licensing agreements do not allow the names of the holders to be identified with the location of their holdings, so it was not possible to directly compare the list derived from the mapping process with the census list. However, it is most likely that the omitted holdings from the census are small-scale holdings.

Analytic or ‘theoretical’ generalisation – the utility of the analysis to apply beyond the setting for the specific case studied (Yin, 2014, p. 40) – is the more common form of generalisation in qualitative research. This generalisation applies to identified processes or pivotal elements which are likely to be occurring in another location; that is, the potential to develop or advance theories about why particular actions or events occur (Mason, 2002). Achieving saturation is important to demonstrating the resultant ‘validity’ of the research (Fusch and Ness, 2015). Saunders et al. (2017) identify four different models of saturation, recognising that these often overlap in practice:

- Theoretical saturation: the degree to which data support theoretical development
- Inductive thematic saturation: the degree to which new codes or themes are continuing to emerge from data analysis
- \textit{A priori} thematic saturation: the degree to which identified data exemplify (rather than develop or refine) a theory
- Data saturation: the degree to which new data repeat what was expressed in previous data

Once saturation is achieved, data collection typically ceases. Saturation is thus a major factor in determining sample size (Fusch and Ness, 2015). In the parish study method, data collection continues until the entire population is reached. As such, data saturation not achieved on the parish until the map is completed: new data collection proceeds geographically, rather than following emerging theory. There is
thus a trade off with promising a completed map to participants, when this may not be necessary to achieve the research aims. Theoretical saturation on some concepts may be reached before this point; conversely, new strands of inquiry may open up but there is no avenue for respondent selection to follow these theories (i.e., inductive thematic saturation may not be achieved, although new concepts can be explored within the locale in subsequent and second interviews). Interviews can thus function as a set of cases for hypothesis generation, recognised as an important use of case-study data (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this present research, single cases of a large-scale contract farm, an estate, a female farmer, and a horse-breeding enterprise all yielded hypothesis for future testing. A priori thematic saturation may be difficult to achieve, if the phenomenon in question is found to reach beyond the geographical limits of the study. In this present study, I did not rigidly adhere to parish boundaries, in order to include the farmers who identified with Strathben village. Theoretical and data saturation were reached but a priori saturation was not: an important type of hobby farmers, the ‘back to the landers’ described by Halfacree (2006, 2007) are clearly present in the UK, but not in the study site, owing to its peri-urban location. Heley (2010) and Sutherland (2012) have also identified large-scale amenity land managers; these were also absent from the study site.

Saturation was a particular issue for the photo elicitation component, where only 19 of 56 possible participants completed interviews. Most participants initially agreed to be involved in this second stage; lack of time or loss of interest were the most commonly stated reason for not continuing. The resultant ‘rich data’ was thus only available for a subset. For this article, the first and second interviews have been assessed together; the photo elicitation participants represented a cross-section of participants and are unlikely to have biased the findings. Future analysis will focus specifically on the photo elicitation interviews, to assess their added value against the representativeness of participants.

**Ethics and GDPR**

The British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017) recognises that there are no standard ‘recipes’ for resolving the ethical choices inherent in research design. Had the study been based on anonymised qualitative interviews, it would easily meet traditional research ethical standards: the study participants were healthy, consenting adults, and the topics did not involve political, sexual or other known sensitive issues. The ethical choices lie in the methods for recruiting participants, informed consent and legal issues surrounding property boundary identification. The GDPR (EU General Data Protection Regulation) came into force after the study data had been collected. Although it is a distinct issue from research ethics, both relate to informed consent, so are addressed together in this section. However, the primary GDPR issues for this study relate to feasibility, addressed in the following section.

Both the GDPR and the BSA (2017) highlight the importance of freely given informed consent, particularly the extent to which participants understand how their data will be stored and utilised. In this area, GDPR standards have limited impact: ensuring informed consent is already standard ethical research practice. In the
parish study method, acquiring informed consent was particularly sensitive around the production of the map. Confidentiality of study participants was achieved by removing identifiers from transcripts, using pseudonyms and storing data in password protected files. Identifiers and pseudonyms are similarly utilised in the academic presentation of interview data but the map makes it clear to anyone familiar with the area which local farmers did and did not participate in the study. Indeed, participant names are clearly stated in the accompanying index to the map, both of which were distributed to study participants. It was therefore important to ensure that participants truly understood the implications of producing and circulating the map. The BSA (2017) suggests that achieved informed consent proceeds progressively. In this present case, consent was sought on two occasions: verbally at the beginning of the interview, and then in writing some months later, with a request to verify their boundaries (on the basis of a completed map which was posted to them) to ensure accuracy. At this second stage, several participants withdrew their consent to including their holding in the map.

Using photos also requires additional consideration to anonymity and reproduction (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007). Separate written consent was sought during the photo elicitation study, giving the option for all, none, or specific photos to be included in the published research. Copyright is also an issue with photos – although the photos were released for use in research, the consent form clearly assigned copyright to the photographer. Participants were also given the option to have their name, holding or specific identifiers (e.g. house fronts) excluded from publication.

Maintaining confidentiality was a greater challenge for those participants who opted to participate in the research, but not to have their boundary information included in the map. For example, in one case, a couple had sold most of their land to the neighbouring estate but had not made this information public. They therefore opted out of the parish map. However, the high response rate makes property boundaries clearly evident (see Figure 2), even if ownership is not. I have made considerable effort to ensure confidentiality in the research version of the map (e.g., adopting a pseudonym for the parish, removing identifiers, producing it at low resolution). However, the shape of the parish is somewhat distinctive and could be identified through comparison to a parish-based map of Scotland. The ethical choice in this instance is to follow due diligence in making a reasonable effort to keep data confidential, and ensuring that individual quotations are not associated with specific map locations in the research outputs.

‘Freely given’ consent implies lack of duress. This issue is more commonly addressed in the health care sciences than in rural research; articles on recruitment for nursing and social work studies, for example, identify the power dynamics between professionals and patients, and resultant vulnerability of study participants, who may feel they cannot refuse to participate (see Holloway and Wheeler, 1995). To a lesser extent, although I had no pre-existing relationship to most of the interviewees, the aim of completing the map invoked a degree of social obligation: engaging participants involved pointing out that their section of the map would be empty if they did not participate. A common response when asked for interview was that the respondent was not sufficiently important to include in the study. This stance typically reflected their belief that they were ‘not really a farmer’, and or not actively managing
their land. In essence, potential participants attempted to de-select themselves (in part) on the basis of inactivity. The research method was thus particularly beneficial for convincing participants who did not see themselves as farmers to engage in the research.

The ethics of offering incentives for research participation has had limited exploration in qualitative research (Head, 2009). The completed map was offered as an incentive to participate. This map included the identity of consenting owners and tenants of holdings throughout the study site (as well as publicly identified holdings, such as Forestry Commission forests). It is possible that participants agreed to interviews because they wanted access to the map, not because they wanted to answer the research questions. However, Head (2009) points out that any research participant will have a number of motivations for participating in a study; inducements offered by the researchers may play a very minor role in the decision to participate. Grady (2001) argues that offering a form of compensation demonstrates respect for the time and contribution made by research participants. Use of photo elicitation can also be empowering to participants, enabling them to direct the interview by the content of their photos (Oliffe and Bottorff, 2007). Certainly, the map was of great interest to study participants, clearly offering a measure of reward: under Scotland’s Outdoor Access legislation, people have the right to walk across most rural properties (see Scottish National Heritage, 2018); study participants were particularly curious about the ownership of the land they accessed in this manner. Less interest was expressed in the report on study findings.

It is important to note that there are legal issues associated with producing maps of holding boundaries. The BSA (2017) notes that confidential information provided during research is not afforded legal privilege: it may be liable to subpoena by court. For this reason, the consent form explicitly included a statement that boundary definitions did not constitute a formal declaration of boundaries or ownership. Most study participants were remarkably relaxed about identifying their holding boundaries, reflecting the stability of holding boundaries in the region. This may not have been in case in other locales, where identifying boundaries could be a source of conflict. The potential for research to create hostility by highlighting local tensions is an established issue in community studies (Crow, 2008).

Feasibility

The parish research method presents a number of feasibility issues. The approximate size of the population could be determined at the beginning of the study by accessing agricultural census figures, enabling estimation of data collection costs. The optimal scale of qualitative datasets is the subject of debate: the appropriate sample size is one that adequately answers the research question (Marshall, 1996), representing a subjective assessment of the researcher. Creswell (1998) suggests that 20 to 30 interviews are typically sufficient for qualitative interviews. Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argue that this can be achieved in a smaller number of cases (i.e., less than 20); Guest et al. (2006) suggest that saturation could be achieved in as few as six interviews. For heterogeneous populations, this number increases (Ritchie et al., 2003, in Mason,
In this present study, 62 interviews were conducted, representing 43 holdings. The number of interviews is thus within the range expected to achieve saturation.

In practical terms, assembling this type of dataset is time consuming. Participant recruitment for the present case was essentially achieved through snowball sampling – asking participants to identify their neighbours and associated contact information. Progressive identification of participants inevitably leads to delays between contacting individuals and their availability. For map completion, all potential participants are important; it is not possible to substitute more readily available candidates. It is this area where GDPR restrictions would have the greatest impact on future use of the parish study method. Under new GDPR-based protocols at the funding institution, study participants would be required to contact their neighbours to seek permission before providing their names and contact information to the researcher. This would substantially increase the time needed and difficulty associated with recruiting participants. Alternately, participants could be identified using Gill et al. (2010)’s methodology of driving to houses located in the specified geographical region and asking if household members were the owners or managers of nearby land. However, a number of the owners resided outside of the parish and would thus be difficult to reach. ‘Foreign elements’ (inclusion of irrelevant interviewees – see Burton and Wilson, 1999) also inevitably occurred, when it was discovered during the interview that the interviewee did not own or manage the minimum threshold of land. These feasibility aspects thus need to be weighed against the opportunities offered by the method. These issues also make it prohibitive to undertake this methodology over a larger geographical scale.

Time requirements are further expanded by the informed consent, mapping and photo elicitation processes: all participants needed to be contacted a second time to acquire written consent and verify holding boundaries. During the period of the study (2012 – 2014) three properties changed ownership, one became tenanted and two interview participants died. This required dating the map to a specific year, and need to remove data from the dataset owing to inability to verify consent. In addition, the photo elicitation component allowed 6 months for photos to be taken, followed by reminders, photo processing, and a second interview. Meo (2010, p. 165) described photo elicitation techniques as ‘more time consuming, expensive, and demanding than traditional interviews’. Photos also required a separate data management strategy, to ensure that they were kept secure, not identifiable to particular individuals, but available to be taken to the correct interview. Production of the map and a professional quality report for participants also involved additional time.

Empirical findings

Important criteria for evaluating research methods are the extent to which resultant findings are convincing and useful. The parish study yielded a substantial, rich data set which is forming the foundation of a number of papers (e.g., Sutherland and Huttunen 2018; Sutherland, 2019) focusing on land use change and gentrification processes. In this section I present findings relating to a major driver behind the study design: the inclusion of hobby farmers and their range of land management practices.

It became evident in the study that there were considerable inconsistencies in how study participants understood their identities as farmers, and those of their
neighbours. There was a clear distinction between full-time farmers, part-time farmers, crofters or smallholders and rural residents, but the term ‘hobby’ was typically ascribed to someone else’s activities. Only full-time farms (i.e., farmers without substantive off-farm employment, of which there were 8 in the study site) were deemed ‘real farms’ by other commercial farmers. In the words of Agnes ‘A real farmer just lives and breathes farming, it’s his whole life’. Consistent with Burton (2004), commercial farmers and small-scale land managers utilised roadside farming to evaluate each other’s identities: farmers with tidy, well-kept farms with good quality livestock or crops were identified as ‘good farmers’ (a concept utilised in a number of papers for identifying social norms in farming – see Burton, 2004; Sutherland and Darnhofer, 2012; Riley, 2016; Shortall et al., 2018).

Lee-Ann: What is it that makes you think that they’re a good farmer?

Fred: Well they’re looking after the ground, look after a’thing. [Farmer name] has tidied it up naeend. And he’s growing smashing crops.

Farmers who hired contractors to do their field work or spent most of their time on their urban occupations, were not identified positively. Good farming identity was linked to skilled role performance, which could not be achieved if the performance (e.g., of field crop production) was contracted to someone else. Importantly, despite the small geographical scale, there was not the consistency in definition of ‘good farmers’ that could be expected (e.g., on the basis of Gray, 1998; Burton, 2004) – there was no consistent, locally embedded ideal. Instead, farmers that one respondent identified positively as ‘go ahead’ were not identified by others, based on different standards. Findings are thus consistent with research demonstrating the fragmentation of good farming identity (Sutherland, 2012, 2013); findings also suggest that the inclusion of a wider range of land managers yields a more contested portrayal of good farming ideals.

The emphasis on full-time farm employment led to the social distinction between full and part-time farms. The term ‘hobby farming’ is pejorative, embodying a critique of un-economic farming practice:

Peter: ... he’s not taking it on to really farm it to get make a living, he’s taken it on as a hobby farm and that’s what happens to all the wee farms nowadays they either land into a bigger farm or guys like him buy them and make them hobby farms which is’nae creating a lot for the economy of the country.

Commercial farmers thus object to the loss of economic contribution made by part-time farms. Part-time farmers tended to have dual identity, primarily associated with their full-time occupations (e.g., teacher, agricultural advisor), but were clear that their farming activities were not recreational – they run commercial businesses – while recognising that they have the leisure for amenity investment. However, as a key informant explained, although full-time farmers would see part-time farmers as hobby farmers:

[Part-time farmers] would’nae regard themselves as hobby farmers even though they maybe spend 20 per cent of their time on the farm in a year and get most of their income
elsewhere. They would regard themselves as farmers and they would regard the folk in the ten acre place that have a few horses, and, even may keep a few sheep or something, muck about with stuff, they would say hobby farmer.

Although their farming activities were described positively as active choices they had made because of the enjoyment they took in farming activities (i.e., lifestyle-oriented decisions) they did not naturally affiliate themselves with the term ‘hobby’. It was important to them for their farming activities to be recognised as serious and active, but distinct from ‘serious’ farming:

Alex: If a hobby is what you do not in order to get your bread and butter then I am prepared to plead guilty to the charge of being a hobby farmer! Probably towards the serious and active end of the hobby, I’m not a hobby farmer who swans around in a Land Rover and gets his serfs to do things while he goes off to the city!

Marion: I think I tend to call it a farm but then I... I immediately qualify it and say but we don’t live off it.

Alex: Yeah but that’s... that is significant farming. I’m not sure that I count us as significant farming! We like living in this kind of a place.

Alex was responding to my question about how to categorise his style of land management. At 50 hectares, his farm is too large to be considered a small-holding, but he clearly considered the term hobby to be negative. In Strathben Parish, the term ‘hobby farmer’ is pejorative, associated in this case with the history of landed gentry.

The occupiers of smaller-scale holdings (e.g., 4 – 10 ha) also did not consider themselves to be hobby farmers, because they did not consider themselves to be farmers. Instead they identified their holdings as smallholdings or crofts, which typically included some small livestock for self-consumption, and often a horse. Crofting is an historically embedded form of small-scale, part-time farming (see Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2014), affiliated locally with a granite quarry, where workers had traditionally been allocated small acreages on which to self-provision and thus supplement their wages. This type of respondent affiliated with this traditional form of land management which they undertook on a recreational basis. Farmers were understood to operate larger acreages and produce commercial commodities.

In addition, there were also a number of respondents who did not identify themselves with production at all. Households with horses did not see themselves as ‘farmers’ but as horse-keepers. Others had no animals at all, viewing their land as ‘a huge garden with a lot of trees’ or ‘a bungalow with a lot of land’. Within this cohort, there were seven holdings identified where land was not actively being managed – i.e. no livestock or labour invested.

Adam: the field is about 4 ½ acres altogether and we combined part of the field into making it a bigger garden. And the only thing we’ve used the field for is keeping ponies or occasionally we get the farmer to cut the grass to take hay off of it.
Lee-Ann: Yeah.

Joan: If we feel like it! If not we just let it grow wild.

Adam: Aye occasionally [local farmer] might say that if he’s interested but, not really, I think the state of the grass there he’d probably think well... there’s probably not a lot of good in it maybe!

Adam and Joan identify the opportunity and luxury of land access to have a large garden or keep horses but place low priority on maintaining it in productive condition. They are clearly aware that the value of their property as pasture has declined over time. Local farmers will approach smallholders to use their fields but this has become less common as machinery sizes have gotten larger, making it difficult to access small pieces of land.

Inactive land management – *de facto* land abandonment – was the outcome of two trajectories. Some purchased their house with land, anticipating that once they had land, they would utilise it, but this never materialised; others progressed into inactivity over time. Both trajectories reflected a passive choice: busy with urban employment, lack of time, no (remaining) family desire to use the land for its original purpose. Alison describes how her land use changed with her family’s life stages:

I think we stopped having energy or whatever for cattle, and working, you know getting off to work in the morning and all the rest of it. We had it up until the children were sort of in their early teens probably and then it sort of started to go to seed like it is now! So when the local farmers asked me what I’m going to do with it I say well I’m creating a wildlife sanctuary! [Laughter] And the deer come, and the foxes come, and the badgers come, its good, the red squirrels and, yeah, yeah.

Alison expressed the common belief amongst these rural residents that unmanaged land was good for wildlife and nature conservation; in contrast, Strathben’s commercial farmers expressed concern about land degradation – drains not maintained, persistent weeds populating the fields. Inactive land managers also described practical realities of putting the land to use through rental: their land was often marginal and small-scale. Utilising a parish study method brought these inactive land managers into the research, improving understanding of the existence and processes of *de facto* land abandonment, which was unexpected in a peri-urban region.

**Concluding discussion**

The ‘cultural turn’ in rural studies has seen a dramatic increase in qualitative studies over the past three decades (Cloke, 1997; Morris and Evans, 2004), but relatively few critiques of associated methods. In this article, I have analysed the potential of a parish-based research methodology. I argue that the parish method has three primary values: inclusion of ‘unusual suspects’ in the research process, the opportunity for reciprocal assessment of local social norms, and in-depth analysis of spatially based phenomena.
In order to access a difficult to reach population, the map was utilised both as a tool and as a tangible reward for participation. It is likely that a number of study participants would not have been identified or accepted the invitation to participate in a traditional snowball or purposive sample: passive land managers are not easy to identify, and once identified, attempted to de-select on the basis of their inactivity. Study findings demonstrate the importance of including this cohort: the contested nature of good farming standards, differential definitions of hobby farmers and the processes associated with de facto land abandonment. Study findings also support Burton and Wilson’s (1999) critique of the representativeness of telephone directories and demonstrate the incompleteness of the agricultural census as a sampling frame.

The parish-based approach demonstrates the importance of critically evaluating the sampling frame utilised in empirical studies and considering options for ensuring that research goes beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Inactive small-holders land managers may not be the only missing participants from standard sampling approaches. Any study participant has a number of motivations for (or against) participating (Head, 2009). This raises questions about other de-selection processes, and associated weaknesses in datasets. What subtleties or nuances are lost in the omission of individuals who may de-select, or be less available for a variety of reasons (e.g., do purposive or snowball samples under-represent part-time farmers, both because of unavailability and because other farmers and key informants do not see part-timers as ‘real farmers’ and therefore do not recommend them as interview candidates)? Are individuals who are willing to be vocal about their participation in agro-environmental schemes, for example, truly representative of those who participate? A given sample may be justifiable on the basis of the range of holding types identified, but does it necessarily follow that it has identified the full range of perspectives and management practices of the study population? How are the time requirements of particular methods (e.g., photo-elicitation) influencing participant selection and resultant findings? These are important questions for future research.

The research also raised issues of incentivising participation. Study participants are typically engaged as volunteers; their motives for participating are not typically critiqued. Producing reports specifically oriented towards study participants is standard practice in some research settings, but not a requirement of research processes. In this present case, returning the completed map to participants was clearly a valued output of the project for participants, but involved substantial additional time to produce and verify consent. Limited budgets and the pressures of academic career development can lower this priority. However, lack of perceived value – at present and in relation to prior research experiences – may be a reason for self-deselection by prospective participants. Demonstrating the value to research participants is increasingly being required by funders (e.g., the European Commission’s Responsible Research and Innovation approach, see EC, 2018). Given the demands on farmers’ time, particularly those working full-time off-farm, incentivisation is likely to become an important issue. The differential impact of various forms of incentives and motivations for research participation needs to be critically assessed in order to equip scientists for future rural research.
Notes

1 I have been careful not to label my approach ‘participatory mapping’ because the process was at the low end of measures of participation (e.g., Arnstein’s, 1969 ladder). Study participants provided information but did not direct the research process.

2 Pseudonyms are adopted throughout the paper to preserve anonymity.

3 The opposite of thick description are ‘thin descriptions’: accounts of facts (e.g. actions and attributes) without associated motivations or meanings (Brekhus et al., 2005).

4 In one case, neighbours were unable to identify the land holder, and whether a section of land was one or more holdings.

5 The total number of holding codes assigned to Strathben parish fluctuates. In 2011 there were 63, in 2012–67, in 2013–66, in 2014–64, in 2015–65, in 2016–62.

6 This would not be an issue in countries where land holding information is readily available e.g., Denmark, see Primdahl (1999).

7 Census statistics on livestock numbers were also inconsistent with study findings; in the UK census, all the livestock reported by a holding are identified with the address of the holding headquarters, but may be located elsewhere. Statistical analysis by parish can thus be misleading.

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Conflict of Interest

I declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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